

ALTERNATIVE PROJECTIONS

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INTERVIEW SUBJECT: Harry Gamboa Jr.

Biography:

Since 1972, Harry Gamboa Jr. has been actively creating works in various media and forms that document and interpret the contemporary urban Chicano experience. He co-founded Asco (Spanish for nausea), the East L.A. conceptual-performance art group active from 1972-1987. Asco was awarded a Spirit of Los Angeles Latino Heritage Award by Los Angeles Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa in 2010 and in the fall of 2011 the collective will be the subject of a retrospective at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA).

Gamboa's work has been widely exhibited nationally and internationally, including at the Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Smithsonian Institution; and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. He is the recipient of the Rockefeller Humanities Fellowship at CSU Los Angeles (2004), the Durfee Artist Award (2001), and the Flintridge Foundation Visual Artist Award (2000), and has been awarded by the J. Paul Getty Trust Fund for the Visual Arts (1990), California Arts Council (1996), and National Endowment for the Arts (1987 and 1980). Gamboa is on the faculty of the Program in Photography and Media at CalArts and lectures in the Chicana/o Studies Department at CSU Northridge.

Filmography:

Agent X (1984, ¾ tape, 00:04:47)
Asco performance documentation (1974, Super-8, 00:10:00)
Baby Kake (1984, ¾ tape, 00:06:02)
Fire Ants for Nothing (1994, SVHS, 00:08:00)
Huevitos (1994, SVHS, 00:21:00)
Imperfecto (1983, ¾ tape, 00:34:00)
Loner with a Gun (1994, SVHS, 00:08:00)
No Supper (1987, ¾ tape, 28:00)
Vaporz (1984, ¾ tape, 00:7:40)

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Interviewer: Jesse Lerner

Cameraperson: Laida Lertxundi

Transcript Reviewer: Harry Gamboa Jr and Ben Miller

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Interviewer: Jesse Lerner

Cameraperson: Laida Lertxundi

Transcript Reviewer: Harry Gamboa Jr and Ben Miller

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Interviewer: Jesse Lerner

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Interview date: May 8, 2010

Interviewer: Jesse Lerner

Cameraperson: Laida Lertxundi

Transcript Reviewer: Harry Gamboa Jr and Ben Miller

TAPE 1: HARRY GAMBOA JR

00:00:16

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

My name is Harry Gamboa, Jr. H-A-R-R-Y G-A-M-B-O-A J-R, period.

00:00:25

JESSE LERNER

And I understand you were born and grew up right here in Echo Park.

00:00:31

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Yes. [HG: I was born at the Queen of Angels Hospital overlooking the 101 freeway in 1951. I've heard the story that I wasn't spanked. I heard brakes screeching and I immediately found myself on the fast lane. So I took a liking to Los Angeles upon my first exposure here. As it turns out both of my parents had done some of the groundwork here in L.A. My father was brought here when he was less than a year old.]

00:01:08

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And my mother came here from El Paso, Texas, I guess it must have been 1949, '50, grouped together with a handful of people that also came here at the same time and sort of changed the environment here in L.A., sort of the Pachuco influence, the El Paso influence, sort of introducing the language form Caló. So I kind of grew up with that kind of language being spoken at home. My relatives were not Pachucos.

00:01:49

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

But they were of that era and spoke in this form and kind of had sort of very interesting attitude that was very highly agitated, very outspoken. By the time I was born they had all gone through World War II and they had these experiences of... a few of my uncles had had this experience of extreme violence. One of them actually was sort of a hardcore warrior, landed in Normandy, was known for having killed many, many Nazis in one afternoon. Didn't shoot any of them, stabbed them all.

00:02:28

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

So I had this kind of background of people that wanted me to learn how to live in a certain way which wasn't exactly adaptive to being in L.A. because it was more designed for the battlefield. But at a very early age I kind of had that introduction to thinking about things, sort of the survivalist mentality, this idea of being able to speak my mind, of also to respond quite usually with some form of dominating force.

00:03:09 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

Which was not exactly a really great idea for a young, skinny, very short kid. It wasn't going to work if I was going to go out and fight people physically. That wasn't my great skill at all. However, as a kid growing up I spent I guess the first couple of years here in Echo Park, Silver Lake area. I remember overlooking the Sunset Boulevard and seeing the Pacific Electric Railway trains passing by. I remember hanging around in downtown L.A., very film noir kind of environment actually.

00:03:52 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

Post-war, but it was also pre-Civil Rights era in which I remember distinctly various episodes where racism was blatantly incorporated into the daily life and the kind of responses people would give to that racism which, because again it was so dominant and people had been raised in this kind of environment, that quite often people wouldn't respond to it effectively. They would just kind of give into this racism which was contradictory to the kinds of things that I had mentioned earlier, that here you go and you fight in World War on behalf of your country and yet you're still being subjected to racism.

00:04:32 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

This, of course, is kind of experiences even pre-elementary school actually at this point. And I think one of the things as a young child I kind of realized and I tended to be very observant and I tended to, for some reason or another, was able to kind of capture things visually in a way and put things two and two together all the time. As a young kid I seem to have always taken an interest in looking and also as a young child I'm part of the first TV generation.

00:05:09 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

So my experience with television was very dominant in the sense that it was sort of a new medium for many people. But for me it was my contemporary medium and I found myself drawn to the kind of programming where... the early programming, much of which was live, much of which actually were these very well trained, very well honed actors, commentators, very witty individuals, people that have worked on the Hollywood film industry, some of the silent screen greats were some of my TV heroes.

00:05:49 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

Buster Keaton, for instance, had a live TV show and which every single week he nearly killed himself and it was like wonderful to watch this and kind of the onset of the new dialogue programs. And I found that the conversation and the level of vocabulary and the kind of conceptualizing of ideas superseded anything I was going to be taught in school. I began kindergarten at Lorena Street School, a public school, in Boyle Heights when I was only four and a half years old.

00:06:32 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

On that first day I was basically still speaking Spanish, knew a little bit of English but I preferred to speak Spanish at that point up to, a four and a half year old level of Spanish. I was greeted by the teacher who pulled me from the crowd and we went over to the closet and she pulled out a sheet of paper and, I'm not exactly sure what she was saying but next thing you know we're rolling this thing, she taped it together, put some paint on it, sat me on a chair, and put it on top of my head and it was a dunce cap that said 'Spanish.'

00:07:08 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And basically I was told I could take it off when I learned to speak English properly. I had a cousin who took me to my first day in kindergarten and kind of explained to me—he didn't intervene—but explained to me that basically the teacher was calling me an idiot. Again, being the kind of person I am, the declaration of cultural war was on day one. And I basically accepted that challenge and that was kind of the onset to what I've done my whole life and I'm still continuing to do that.

00:07:45 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

Basically it wasn't exactly hatred, it was just simply standing up for my rights. I wasn't aware of what my civil rights were. I wasn't aware of what my human rights were but I knew what it meant to feel violated and I was not about to be violated. As it turned out over the years that I went to elementary school and junior high school which they call middle school now and high school in East Los Angeles, it became very apparent that the particular schools I went to were basically these social laboratories.

00:08:23 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Governmentally sponsored social laboratories on which to generate failure of a vast population. As it turns out the high school I went to had the highest dropout rate in the whole United States, had the largest percentage of people that were eventually wind up going to Vietnam and killed in Vietnam. It was also the site of sort of the expansion of gang activity and also the introduction of police activity on campus. The idea of corporal punishment was allowed during this period of time and the term corporal punishment sounds like a spanking but at some schools kids would get beat up, punched, kicked, ribs broken, teeth knocked out.

00:09:10 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

At the junior high school I went to they had these shop classes. A very, very famous situation where they would train you to work in factories basically, but they would have the students making the weapons that the teachers could use in class. There was metal class and a very famous device they designed where it was a piece of metal inside of a tennis shoe. This way you could beat students up and it wouldn't leave any marks. This kind of activity taking place in the schools— very, very over populated.

00:09:42 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

They hadn't built schools in many years at this point. But again growing up there I was very much aware of this technique of control. I was also very aware of ways in which to organize people even as a young child. I always had friends. I think when I was a very young boy, very, very young child, I think I decided I would just push somebody and, of course, that guy, he immediately beat the hell out of me and I said well I'm not like my uncles.

00:10:15 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I'm not about to go and hurt somebody and I'm not about to win this fight and I learned at a very early age I could organize many people to support me and I immediately went to work. I worked in the cafeteria as a very young child. I would go in the morning and I was entrepreneurial and at very early stage I would go in the morning, early in the morning and roll the forks and spoons in a napkin and do that because it had a cafeteria. Then during the lunch break I would go around and push this cart and sell the milk to the kids for a nickel.

00:10:53 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And in exchange for that during the nutrition break I got a cookie and a hot chocolate and during the lunch break I was able to eat a meal if I cleaned the garbage off the plates. And then I'd go off in the school grounds and find the biggest, toughest guys and ask them if they like chocolate cake. In the end I'd have five guys that liked chocolate cake and once a week they got their chocolate cake, and then other people that liked macaroni and other people that liked this and before you knew it I had an entire army.

00:11:20 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And I was never touched throughout my high school years because I could basically call people for favors because I kept them all fed. I was also very good at procuring things and also the ability to kind of insert ideas into young people's minds and I would go out and read. I actually learned English by reading comic books. In the 1950's, again—combined with the information that I was getting from television—the comic books of the 1950's of course were all concerned with post-nuclear conditions, with fascism, with the idea of overpowering and sort of this idea of also racism and violence

00:12:08 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

In this very condensed version of storytelling for children were all these very incredible concepts that you know initiated from Einstein and other people and from that to then distill that and to bring it for my own personal use, I found that I can make use of this. Then I found myself introduced to certain newspapers and certain magazines, and by the time I was in the 7th grade maybe I had kind of identified one or two other people that were very, extremely bright and we decided we were going to study the dictionary.

00:12:47 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And we got very involved and sort of having these little micro study groups and all through the time I was always on the streets and, Jesse, I think you know that I never once passed a single class from kindergarten through high school. I had straight F's. I just never— in my life I have never taken a test. I have never turned in homework in my entire life. I've just never done it. I was defiant and whether I knew the answers was inconsequential to me.

00:13:24 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I just never did that. It really didn't matter because I would be pushed ahead. I was actually a talented musician so I was always playing in the orchestra. I would still, you know, called upon to give an answer and I just knew the answer but wasn't interested at all in academia one bit, whatsoever because there was no connection with what I was experiencing in my life with what school had to offer. In elementary school, for instance, one of the other things that was quite evident was sort of this cold war mentality.

00:14:09 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I literally grew up during this period of time when people would have drop drills and once a month they would have these air raid sirens and sort of this other idea that was inserted into my mind at that point was that, wow, we could be blown up by a nuclear bomb at any given moment. I would say well, then what is the point of doing the homework. I mean, you know, I might as well enjoy my life at this point. And then I would see things like, no Mexicans allowed.

00:14:40 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

Well, I said, well, you know, what is the point... where is all headed? I knew a lot of adults. I'd see them and they looked very tired and they worked, the hardest working people I'd ever seen in my life—to this day still—the hardest working people being rewarded the least. And I said well that's really a very bad option too. I might as well just have fun from the beginning and so I found myself ditching school quite often.

00:15:02 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I'd roam the city and roam my neighborhood and I'd hop on street cars and was always in downtown L.A. and the experience of being a kid on the street and kind of wiry and jumping around, got a chance to see many, many different experiences, people injured, people happy, beautiful people, ugly people, scary people, because I was always making a little bit of money here and there. I was always eating at different places and developed sort of an incredible palate, and these places don't exist anymore.

00:15:38 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And I'd be the only kid ordering my own dessert or something. Then maybe get back to school. By the time I was in junior high school which was the 7th grade which would have been the early 60's. In the 7th grade was my introduction to— maybe there were one or two teachers there that were kind of very essential to my development. They'd introduce a little bit of certain kinds of literature, Shakespeare, for instance or maybe some of the Greek classic, maybe the idea of sort of the contemporary Beat counter-culture at that point.

00:16:20 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

However, there was this sort of the counter element in that school where they would invite military personnel to come on campus and they would actually take all the boys of the campus, of the boys from a particular grade, take them to the gym and turn off the light and show pornography and pass out little thimble-fulls of whiskey and pass out cigarettes and the guy would go around and say, well, listen, you really need to learn how to fuck all the girls because we want you all to leave your kids behind because most of you aren't going to live past 21 anyway and you've all got to learn how to be a man.

00:16:56 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And then they would get one or two guys and they'd punch him and knock him down and they'd say we're going to show you how to fight and treat everybody kind of like in a very—it was almost like a mini-boot camp kind of thing and I'd go around and I'd been reading the *New York TIMES* and *TIME* magazine and I'd be whispering in everybody's ears, I'd say, these guys are trying to get you to go to Vietnam. These guys want to have you killed. They're not talking about getting you killed.

00:17:16 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

They want to turn you into killers and as it turns out, of course, I was right. That's exactly what they wanted to do and then when I started the 10th grade, I wound up going to Garfield High instead of Roosevelt High School and on the first day of the 10th grade was also the first day of the new principal at Garfield High and this school was the highest populated school in L.A. at the time. It had like 3000, 3500 students in there. This guy was a colonel in the Air Force reserves.

00:17:49 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And so his initial statement—they brought in everybody into this Garfield auditorium, this famous place has recently burned down—and he says listen, I'm only talking to ten percent of you because that's all that's going to graduate anyway. And he went on and on and then from the back row I said well, fuck you, asshole, and lights turned off, turned on, and nobody snitched and I knew I was in the right environment. I knew that I had found my place.

00:18:18 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And I actually kind of established my status there on day one and became involved with the development of the— from that point on I actually got to meet a lot of people in politics, people who had been involved in supporting the zoot suiters, people that had been involved in protesting against nuclear tests and in favor of banning the bomb, people that had fought on behalf of other types of different social issues. I was introduced to all kinds of people that were kind of on the left, some on the very far left and some even beyond the left.

00:18:55 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And also different types of people that were writers and artists and other kinds of people who had done things but there was no venue for them and there was actually maybe one or two people that I met. For instance, Bert Corona who I knew very well as a young person who actually was trained by Aimee Semple McPherson, just down the block from here at the church across the street from Echo Park Lake. He had a persuasive way of speaking, and I learned a lot of techniques from him.

00:19:20 HARRY GAMBOA HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

There was a guy by the name of Ralph Cuaron who was an intensely determined activist who had been involved in the public housing issue but had these various techniques by which to draw attention to yourself and were very--

00:19:43 JESSE LERNER

Referring to the Angelus...?

00:19:44 HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Yeah, Angelus Temple, yeah, yeah. Yeah, so there's sort of a connection to my training also. So my training to speak, what I was introduced— I think people handed me copies of Dostoyevsky. It was much too early for me to read Dostoyevsky at that point but to be introduced to certain titles which I kept sort of on hold for a little bit. But also I had an opportunity to hang out with Oscar Zeta Acosta and a handful of people.

00:20:10 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I actually was introduced to a lot of small group, in-group kind of information possibly because of the skills I had developed as being one of these people that could kind of work with people. But also I think they were very convinced that I probably wouldn't survive my childhood, which you might as well tell the secrets to this guy because he could possibly go away and never tell. And yet I'm still here and I was able to get some good lessons.

00:20:46 JESSE LERNER

Around the time of [East L.A.] Blowouts, was that how you established these connections?

00:20:52 HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Yeah, during like 1966, '67, I got to meet a lot of different people, and then in 1968 we had the walkouts. There was an apartment complex a block away from Stevenson Junior High School I'd gone to on Princeton Street that was actually owned by the Episcopalian church that was managed by Ralph Cuaron. One apartment unit was for the Brown Berets. One was for a magazine called *REGENERACION*, which I eventually became the editor of.

00:21:24 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

One was for the group of people that we all became sort of the blowout leaders and various leaders would come in and pass there to visit Ralph and other people. So various labor leaders, various political leaders, various religious leaders, various civil rights leaders would pass by and I'd get a chance to meet these people or at least sit in and witness the dialogue that was going on, all the time I should have been in high school which I wasn't most of the time.

00:21:55 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And then we would go out in to the streets and do different types of demonstrations. We did several demonstrations prior to the walkouts. One was actually in front of the Federal Building, the brand new Federal Building here in L.A. and actually was photographed and appeared in *THE HERALD EXAMINER*. I got a chance to meet Reies Lopez Tijerina and other figureheads that emerged out of that period of time, all of which eventually were attacked or, bad things happened to them.

00:22:31 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Many of the people that, when I see the images of the walkouts, well, you know, I'd look at that and it makes me feel sad because half of the boys that are in there were all killed a year later or two years later in Vietnam. So you know, they fought and then they went off to really fight and got killed, or didn't come back exactly in a good way. Growing up in East Los Angeles was, I would say it's probably quite unique because it operated like a separate country within a city.

00:23:05 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

It was so excluded from everything. Everything was designed to keep it almost as a very small colony and if you lived there and you grew up there you really weren't too interested in going out because of so much of the harsh responses to even going outside in your front yard. The place was patrolled heavily by police. The police usually came from elsewhere, then joined the sheriff's department. They used to have a height requirement and basically almost even had basically what was a race requirement to some degree.

00:23:40 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

So there was this kind of overt racial hatred of Mexicans and if it wasn't overt or if it wasn't real it sure was designed to look real and by picking out random sampling of victims which they often did, to just punish people and mete out as harsh discipline on the streets and quite often leave the victims on the street. They would just beat people up and then just leave. And this didn't matter if you were 10 years old, 12 years old, or 20.

00:24:15 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And so this idea that-- [non-interview dialogue]

00:24:45 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Part of growing up this way was that it was... I've kind of explained to people I feel like I grew up in the middle of a war. I was actually at a very young age kind of trained to even think that way. But it really was somewhat of a cultural war, a class war. But not as though I was on the attacking side. I was on the side that was being attacked. So it was this idea of like how does one survive being in the middle of a war when people are either shooting at you or trying to hurt you or trying to take away things that you own.

00:25:18 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

One has to develop skills by which you can side step that because if you want to have a good day the best way to approach anything is by avoidance, and the best way by avoidance is by camouflage, by trickery, by being strong, and by not responding in the manner by which they've been trained to cause other people to respond. And quite often, and that's usually what my technique was, and it continues to be my technique by which I train people and I've always have taught people how possibly to stand, how to walk, how to act, and how to dress.

00:25:54 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And how to be the person that's not going to be the one that's going to be targeted and at the same time gather enough information of where it might be used against those people that are doing the attacking at a later point. Again, not in a violent form but in a social form, you know, cultural form, and this idea of cultural hatred existing in a very minute place, how does one then go to a broader environment and anticipate that hatred in a way so that their cultural violence will no longer be effective.

00:26:29 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

There will be less support for that kind of-- [technical; recorder off]

00:26:51 **JESSE LERNER**

I guess this sort of leads to something I want to ask you to elaborate on, right, because you were talking about this sort of everyday racism in your childhood and by the time we get to your high school years, right, we're talking about the period of the civil rights movement and how this kind of experience of everyday life in Los Angeles and public spaces might have changed.

00:27:14 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Well, you know, one of the things that happened with... The Civil Rights movement played a big role in my kind of social awareness. It contributed to things I'd been learning at that point and being here in L.A., I'd already experienced the Watts riot not only through television but through seeing the smoke off in the distance, not exactly sure what had happened. By the time that East L.A. walkouts came about I think I was a bit more well-studied regarding what would have been the causes, what would have been the responses.

00:28:06 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Part of what came to my conclusion at that period of time was that I actually am an American, I was born here. I deserve the same equal rights as everyone else and yet to be treated differently just didn't exactly work for me and taking a look into the history as to why this was so in this country and where quite often it wasn't exactly overt, actually. It was more through effect. How do you justify the fact that teachers could treat students in a certain way.

00:28:44 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Or that that administrators could treat people in a certain way or that police could treat people in a certain way or that a certain group of people were poor and other people weren't poor and, of course, this all tied into other kinds of social theories and economic theories. But to be living at that point, and at such a young age, and then to be counter-influenced also with the burgeoning counter-culture of music, for instance, which was taking place here in Hollywood, Sunset Boulevard which all through this whole period of time, I had mentioned before, I'd been a musician.

00:29:17 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I took a great interest in music so on the weekends I—and during the week I'd be in East L.A. and in the weekends I'd be in Hollywood and get to witness firsthand some of the great, you know, what they call now rock history, see Janis Joplin or see The Doors or see Jimi Hendrix or see all these really great, Pink Floyd, all these famous bands and to see them live, and then to go back into East L.A. and then the next weekend I think I saw one time John Lennon with a bloody nose once.

00:29:51 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Who knows what period of time that was, near The Whiskey or something and I remember just kind of this idea of breaking down the mythic with the real, the idea that so many people were enjoying themselves or having their leisure and it just within almost within sight, other people, the notion of leisure simply didn't exist. And I've kind of written about it before that the idea that you could stand on any rooftop in East L.A. and see the Hollywood sign, it would be like simply like looking at a distant planet, the effect.

00:30:24 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And yet having direct effect because back then much of live TV was broadcast directly from Hollywood into the homes of East L.A. and yet you would never see a representation of a Chicano or a Mexican and if it was, it was simply negative, negative stereotypes that either promoted hatred or promoted ridicule and ridicule is one of the harshest forms of hatred and which then people learned and then adapted to and wound up hating themselves.

00:30:55 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I've got to tell you, one of my most favorite moments in my whole East L.A. experience—and this would have to be, I don't have any documentation for this but there must be somebody that took a picture or someone that was there besides me—they used to have an East L.A. parade on September the 16th every year that would bring out all the politicians and so one year I was there with my friends and I guess we were all smoking cigarettes.

00:31:19 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I was a young smoker at the time and we're all there and here comes—looked like the Galaxy that's parked out here—it pulls up alongside and everybody's, they're waving and it's Pat and Richard Nixon and a couple of Mexicans—they might have been from MAPA (Mexican America Political Association) for all I know—threw a couple of tomatoes and hit Nixon and it bounced off of him onto Pat and she just went like this and they kept waving. For me that was one of the more joyous moments.

00:31:47 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I've often told people that it could have been that particular moment that caused Nixon to invent the artificial term Hispanic, the term that's a federally designed term to which to dissipate the term Chicano. The term Hispanic was utilized to actually allow the right wing Cubans that were in Florida and elsewhere to funnel all federal funds through the Hispanic groups there to then trickle out the few pennies that would come out to the southwest. And to then impose this term Hispanic on the rest of the U.S. and the rest of the world as a propaganda term.

00:32:31 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

So that to this very day I have students in my Chicano studies class that have grown up their entire lives in the barrios of the Valley and here in South Central that they can't afford to go to school, they can't even afford lunch, and they say they're proud to be Hispanic, and it's a fake term and I completely denounce that term.

00:32:54 **JESSE LERNER**

You mentioned a magazine *REGENERACION*.

00:32:57 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Yes.

00:32:57 **JESSE LERNER**

And that's around the same time, right when you're in...

00:33:00 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Yeah. I used to... you'll have to excuse me. [non-interview dialogue]

00:33:28 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I denounce the term but I do not denounce the people that use it. I feel that the people that use the term Hispanic use it because maybe they were raised to feel that's a proper term but if they were to take a look into the origination it was actually created by a criminal president and with his right-hand man, and I do mean right-hand, Kissinger, who should be sought out by the World Court. You know, it really should be reconsidered.

00:33:58 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I know we talked about, a little bit earlier, about Phantom Sightings in which it really says post-Chicano movement which I think actually at this point is almost contradicted in a way with the situation going on in Arizona. I mean, if there was ever a need for the term Chicano it's actually now. In any case that's just my point of view. But going back to your question again please?

00:34:26 **JESSE LERNER**

Oh, asking about the *REGENERACION*.

00:34:29 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Oh yeah, so maybe in about 1967, maybe late '66, I had met all these people and one of the apartment complexes where this group of people were all at was occupied by a woman by the name of Francisca Flores. And Francisca Flores later became known as the founder of the Comision Feminil, which is sort of the first feminist Chicana... the Chicano Service Action Center. A very, very important woman in terms of organizing Chicanas to get things together.

00:35:08 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

But she used to have a little, a newsletter called *CARTA EDITORIAL*, which was just sort of little bits and pieces of news and bits of pieces of text. I would go there and we'd talk and she was a much more level-headed person than many of the people I'd been hanging around with because some of these people were talking about doing things that would only get you in trouble or killed. And she was one of these people that had a different point of view.

00:35:33 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

She had sort of a feminine point of view, had a femin**IST** point of view and was a little bit more studied in literature and introduced me to a handful of things. I would help her fold these things and we'd send them out and then from there she started the magazine *REGENERACION* which was the same title of the newspaper that was put out by the Flores Magon brothers during the Mexican revolution out of Los Angeles near Roosevelt High School. So it was in the same neighborhood.

00:36:05 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And it was paying homage to the Mexican Revolution as though there had been a continuation of the revolutionary spirit through literature that were—and so she worked on this magazine probably for a couple years or so and quite literally in the midst of the Chicano Moratorium riot, right as the police were attacking people and tear gas was flowing everything and bottles were flying everywhere, everyone's going in different directions, I bumped into her and she handed me the magazine.

00:36:37 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I took it, I read it, I liked it, I wrote a little note. Then she published that note and says, well, welcome, thanks for being the editor now and that's how I became the editor. But I had kind of— she had been one of my mentors basically. So I took on that challenge having no experience at all with graphic arts. My father and my grandfather were both printers. I knew a little bit of concept about that. In fact, my grandfather had a shop just down the street here.

00:37:04 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

My father worked here for a long time and then he worked elsewhere. But I decided that one of the things about the magazine was that it had no visuals and I knew one or two people that I knew that could draw which was Patssi Valdez and Willie Herron and we decided to design... offer it in a different mode.

00:37:46 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Upon looking at the first volume of *REGENERACION*, which is in English I guess, Regeneration, I felt that it needed visual material. I wasn't too interested very much in some of the traditional kind of imagery in a way. I wasn't very clear on what art was about exactly. I wasn't a visual artist at the time. I hadn't started to... I wasn't really a photographer even though I'd shot some photographs but I knew two people that were artists that I felt were artists and it was Willie Herron and Patssi Valdez.

00:38:23 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

I knew them because I had a girlfriend and we used to double date. So I knew them mostly and they were boyfriend and girlfriend at that time.

00:38:30 **JESSE LERNER**

And they went to high school with you.

00:38:32

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Well, Patssi Valdez did and Willie Herron went to Wilson high School and despite comments by Gronk [Glugio Nicandro] he did not attend school during my era at all. But I invited Patssi and Willie to work and Patssi had other ideas and she had to do other things. And so it was Willie Herron and I worked on the first issue together in which we kind of did different drawings.

00:39:07

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I wasn't very clear on how to put together a publication yet, and yet we managed to get it done. And when it went out we got a little bit of response because people were wondering why we were putting drawings in it and it was very— one of the things about East L.A. that was kind of not understood, I guess, is it was a very harshly conservative place. It was almost an orthodoxy of some sort, everyone sort of shared certain values.

00:39:41

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And should you break certain social codes anyone in the community could mete out punishment to stop you because one wrong move you would cause everyone else to suffer. Then again, this kind of falls into sort of this warlike kind of condition where, you know, you're about to rock the boat because we're all going to drown so you'd better behave. But being the person that I was and those kind of experiences I had which was going out and then coming back in, I was always breaking the rules.

00:40:07

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I felt that we actually needed to crank it up a little bit and—well, here, I will mention Gronk one more time—I'd seen his work before and I liked it and—and I invited him and I invited Mundo Meza to do work and by this time I had decided well, I too would probably give my hand at this. Mundo Meza couldn't work with us, he wanted to go off and do other things.

00:40:29

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

But this is basically the way we started all working together as a group, Asco. We worked on the magazines and we got a chance to know each other a little bit better in the process of working during long, long nights of literally drawing. We would get space and then we'd fill it up which meant that we had the galleys that were laid out. We'd have little blocks of space and everyone would get their share and where it had— free to create any image you wanted.

00:40:58 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And that's exactly what we did and so when that first issue came out where all four of us worked, it created kind of an uproar. But it was kind of one of the things I was interested in because I had already been trained a little bit on how to utilize propaganda, printed form propaganda. I had worked for the Chicano Students newspaper. I had worked for the *LA RAZA*, I had designed many, many flyers, had the opportunity to meet Bobby Kennedy, was photographed with him.

00:41:29 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And saw how that image was able to be utilized to alter people's opinion as to who we were and how to legitimize something and counteract things and so the goal was like, how can we create sort of a new presence from where we come from and to give people sort of an additional sliver on the spectrum of what could be considered to be Chicano and actually under that concept of Chicano.

[END TAPE 1]

TAPE 2: HARRY GAMBOA JR

00:00:51

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

My father grew up here in Los Angeles so, you know, brought here— well, he died when he was 81 years old five years ago, six years ago. So he came in and he grew up all the way until he was already 21 or so and I guess he had been in the war already and came back and he used to tell me, he used to say that L.A. was really great until all the Mexicans Americans from Texas showed up. They changed everything.

00:01:19

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

Of course, he fell in love with my mother immediately and the rest is history. But this idea of a very conservative mode of thinking that is of being the Mexican American mode of trying to achieve American values as it were by adopting the various cultural norms of whatever it is that was promoted as being American. For instance, my father was very concerned with maintaining all the holidays. I mean, it was like Thanksgiving was a big day, 4th of July was a big day, Halloween was a big day.

00:01:54

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

My mother, of course, had come from El Paso, Texas to L.A. and really fell in love with all the pop culture food items. So, and this of course was all post war so many of the families, you know, I grew up not eating Mexican food but eating all the pop junk food that was available at the time, white bread, bologna, things that were mixed and matched in such a way that basically was poison for people.

00:02:18

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I also grew up in Los Angeles when almost every single day in Los Angeles, the sky was as a brown as a cup of coffee with cream in it because it was so polluted and this is before they had had any pollution controls. Every single sunset looked like a nuclear bomb explosion. That's the way L.A. was. And so I figured growing up that I was growing up at the end of the world. Again, that's sort of this idea.

00:02:43 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

My response to that is I'm going to have fun going down. And of course, this kind of thought at the age of four and five, probably a young child needed a little help at that point but boy, was I helping myself because there was no help to be found, and I was going to find a way to really turn it all into something. This idea of the theatricality of the way people would respond to powerlessness basically what it was, is you must be able to present yourself as a dignified figure before your peers.

00:03:17 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Yet you have no power because when you go to work wherever you're working at very low wages. You live in a home that's not— maybe you don't even own the home and maybe there isn't enough money for everyone to really have everything that they need but boy, you're going to make it look as best as you can because it's much better than from where you might have come from or where your distant relatives in another country might be living like.

00:03:40 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

So here you're going to be close as you can and you're going to modify it to your own particular needs. So aesthetically it was adapted in such a way because this is all post-Pachuco. It had that kind of influence where there was almost this idea of flair and so any little moment could be cause for a great uproar, could be cause for a great— any little hint that someone likes somebody, it was the biggest love scene in the world.

00:04:09 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I've told people that I would see men mowing their lawns dressed in suits with the expression on their face like they were going to go kill somebody. And then women would go shopping and they all looked like movie stars and they were just going to go to the store. Little kids were dressed in such a way that everyone was picture perfect, but lives were not picture perfect. There was basically, directly governmental forces and social forces that were designed to try to reduce that level of self-confidence in people.

00:04:42 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

To reduce that level of sense of self and difference and equality of difference and I was very much influenced by that. I very much loved the idea that one can make an event out of nothing and make yourself look great out of just a few rags, and cause people to become hypnotized by just one or two little phrases, and even the tone of your voice and the activity and the intensity that one might have, or even the opposite, how one would almost feign this indifference and being cool.

00:05:18 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I've seen a couple people that were nearly beaten to death by police officers and it was as though they were just smoking a cigarette and taking it easy. I saw some people just would not even flinch when they were whipped and this was actually in the classroom, and I was one of them. I was one of these kids. I was beaten rather beautifully. I was beaten beautifully and I think I reacted beautifully because I just told that teacher, I go yeah, keep fucking hitting me you fucking bitch.

00:05:45 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And she kept hitting me, and because she kept hitting me she actually deserved that term and I don't often use that term, but she did beat me. Then a friend of mine says, aw, can't you stop it and then she started stomping on this guy and knocked him out, my friend David, who actually a few years later was killed in Vietnam. So, yeah, he suffered a bit more than me. I've got to tell you that the idea of resisting to that degree, I would actually recommend it. It reduces the pain.

00:06:22 **JESSE LERNER**

You were talking about the moment where you began to work with your, I guess at this point, they were still future collaborators in Asco at the magazine doing illustrations.

00:06:35 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Yeah, there were different people that I've worked with. Probably there's a few names I'm not going to mention at all so I will just say some people. One of the people that I've met through Willie Herron actually was Humberto Sandoval. We met at about the age of 18, a very dear friend of mine. We've saved each other's lives on many occasions. I think it was through Humberto who for many, many years was not ever really referred to in the Asco component which I would bring him into the dialogue about Asco.

00:07:12 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Because without Humberto there really would have been sort of the missing ingredient, this desire to insert chaos to a certain degree and I used to find myself surrounded with a lot of— I always surrounded myself with a lot of people who enjoyed chaos, chaotic situations. I had one or two friends that actually had zero sense of fear. They had no sense of fear. That's okay but I needed someone who had some level of a minute sense of fear and that's my friend Humberto.

00:07:47 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And the reason I needed my friend Humberto was because I have no sense of fear, and if I have no sense of fear that means I will not survive and he was almost like my canary in the coal mine. The minute he got scared, well then that's when I realized I had to stop or go somewhere, and that's why I say he's saved my life on many occasions because when I'd see him pull back a little bit then that means I've got to go too.

00:08:10 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

But other of my friends, they just aren't alive anymore. These people would love to have fun and they used it all up and I've got to tell you I think I've used almost all of it up too and I recently was actually—I don't know if you saw that image I sent out—but I was surrounded by riot police officers from CSU Police, California Highway patrol, and LAPD, just three weeks ago at Cal State Northridge. They all took a step forward, three separate police departments extended their batons and were about to beat me.

00:08:35 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And my response was—because I think I was just about to get hit—was for a fraction of a second I said, boy, this might hurt and then I countered it and I stood up as though I was— I think the thought in my mind was, I go, what have I felt like when I'm drinking a good wine in a good restaurant. And I stood up and kind of just looked that way and they opened up a space without attacking, I swear, and I walked right past them.

00:09:00 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

They then went off and targeted six students and they attacked a 73 year old professor and they put her in the middle of the street and they broke her arm and they took her away and the way they beat the other students and there was no news reporting and it's quite horrific. Hopefully they'll get sued. This all had to do with people protesting on behalf of student rights. But it was all hidden and all covered up immediately. Two Spanish language reporters showed up on the scene and they were lead away by the police.

00:09:29 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

So that's quite current, you know. So yeah, had I not had that early training in which to flip, emotions, attitudes, stance, you know, and I've got to tell you. My—now maybe you've read this too—but you know, my earliest mentors were some of the cartoon characters, Heckle and Jeckle, Bugs Bunny, maybe Daffy Duck, maybe a couple of these other Tex Avery characters. There was one called Screwball Squirrel, but it was always that idea of doing reverse psychology.

00:10:02 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And of course, all these guys that were writing all these things just were hanging out here on Melrose Boulevard in the '40s, but these were all guys that grew up in the Bronx and guys that had suffered severe events and managed to escape and make a living for themselves, and through these kind of ideas they really were passing on very interesting ideas about anarchy and ideas about survivability and ideas of fantasizing and inserting fantasy into someone else to the point that they become hypnotized almost to the degree that they let you go and escape to enjoy another day.

00:10:35 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

They're absorbed with the fantasy and by the time they come back to reality you're gone.

00:10:42 JESSE LERNER

So you mentioned some of the work that you and your future collaborators did with this magazine but it also seems like we're also spilling over into, if not performance, at least actions in public space.

00:10:58 HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Oh yeah, well, you know, I think early on— I think not much has been written about Willie Herron but Willie Herron actually I feel to this day, was probably the, I don't know, I guess maybe I still do believe in purity and I also believe in beauty and I believe in a few things, but I believe in genius also and I think Willie Herron was actually the genius of the group actually. He has this capacity to just touch things and transform them, turn them into something wonderful.

00:11:27 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

But he also had this kind of energy that— extremely daring guy. I mean, just had the ability to do things. I don't exactly— you know, we're all on different trajectories as members of the group, but at some point we all intersected, our lives intersected and that became the group Asco. I had an opportunity to work with them and see them do different things during this period of time, and Willie Herron was a person that kind of had this sort of, this self-imposed idea as to who he was and what he was.

00:11:56 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And being extremely special, and believing it, and having other people believe in it. And he also had this kind of very natural charisma, bisexual appeal; everyone just wanted to be near him and just he was a beautiful looking guy and at the same time exuded a kind of control over people to a degree that it was almost if one weren't a non-believer, one would believe that he had almost spiritual control over people sometimes.

00:12:26

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

He just had this ability to just walk through things and nothing would happen to him. So he and I, we would hang out every once in a while and we decided we were going to go around and spray paint the entire city. We did that for a couple years. We would spray paint—some of the places I won't mention because I think it's probably there's no statute of limitations on some of those—but we did, I think I spray painted skulls on a hundred freeway pillars on the 60.

00:12:58

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And then Willie went off and spray painted all these other things and we spray painted various slogans on various locations, many to do with Hollywood, many to do with business, many to do with other industries again which I won't mention because it probably... there's no—I'll just disclaim. I won't mention anything, nothing specific. But we created these various slogans that were mocking. They were political but at the same time they were insulting and funny and in a way which again I talked about earlier this idea of demeaning people as sort of the harshest form of hatred.

00:13:36

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

That was my approach as like, you know, if you're going to hate me let me figure out a way to hate you a hundred times harder because that was a lesson my uncles taught me. If someone punches you you're supposed to hit them a hundred times, a hundred times harder. That's what got them through World War II, that's what got them through El Paso and I got to tell you, that's what got me through East L.A., without ever touching anybody either.

00:14:00

JESSE LERNER

Some of these, correct me if I'm wrong, but as I understand it some of these interventions in public spaces when you begin to document photographically and then Super 8 film, or maybe we should just start like your relationship with the photographer.

00:14:18

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Yeah, so, well, here it's a kind of super basic actually. My mother always had a Kodak Brownie camera around her neck. Snap pictures, she took a million pictures okay and so big, big childhood books, a lot of pictures. Like I mentioned before, pictures of me as a baby here in front on a blanket at Echo Park. So throughout always a camera being snapped and my aunt was married to this one guy who was almost like one of my characters, I've got to tell you.

00:14:57 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

His existence was very influential. He worked at a stove factory which was called O'Keefe & Merritt and I believe even Shifra Goldman worked there I heard recently at some point. But it was one of the bigger factories that was here and they produced ovens and stoves, and this guy was very hyper and real crazy guy and he'd get home and a finger was missing, and then one other day another finger's missing and okay, so he's missing two fingers. He was always being wounded on the job somehow.

00:15:27 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

But he took a liking to the Super 8 camera, or the 8mm camera, and so the parties on the weekends was everybody getting drunk and creating these scenes. So there would be parties and then people would get dressed in drag or people would fight or my uncle, I had one uncle who would be running all the time and he was a detective and that was sort of his fictional identity. He wanted to be a detective like in *DRAGNET* and so everyone was a criminal but it was always a comedy.

00:15:52 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

So me growing up it was always my family members and costume of some sort and the kids running around and everybody drunk and everybody happy and watching these movies, and in the end— and every Christmas this guy would decorate his home and had become a fanatic about it, and every single day, there was one year for a Christmas season he decorated his home differently every single day. He would take the lights down, put something up, take the lights down and then finally one day he's up on the roof dressed like Santa Claus reading the newspaper and then he tumbled off the roof and he got injured again.

00:16:31 **JESSE LERNER**

And when he went back to work he lost more and more fingers and finally he had only one or two little stubs and he was no good at the factory anymore and at that point he decided to start a conjunto , a trio and of course the only instrument he was about to play was the accordion on stubs. This guy was kind of an interesting because—and I've told this story before and it's a really good one—where my aunt very extreme looking female, woman; a very large breasted woman, very thin waist.

00:17:12

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Big, very much like almost this actress, her name was Iris Chacon, kind of big showgirl kind of woman; my aunt would water her lawn in a bikini, a leopard bikini. And so she'd—and I loved my aunt—and she would water the lawn and so people would come by and the traffic would be diverted from Whittier Boulevard just to see my aunt water every afternoon. One day I guess some guy had come by to talk to her and my uncle showed up and says well, what are you doing here?

00:17:39

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And he said well, I'm the salesman and would you like to buy a refrigerator. A beautiful woman like this needs a refrigerator. Her husband being kind of on this macho thing, yes, of course, he didn't read it, signed it. The next day they delivered seven refrigerators and there was no consumer protection at the time and it was from Dearden's, by the way. They still kind of prey on, well, I'm not going to say that either because I could, well, back then they—P R A Y, how's that? They'd pray for, they pray for Hispanic consumers, how's that.

00:18:10

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

My uncle just took it without blinking, flinching. He says yeah, put them in the back and I spent all afternoon with my other cousins loading the things up with beer and those refrigerators stayed in the backyard until he died and when they had his funeral reception in the end, he had enough refreshments for everybody and everybody was dancing in the backyard. So this idea of the theatricality aspect, this idea of responding to the way people would create these mythic narratives to construct their lives in a way to give it some logic as to why they were even here.

00:18:49

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

Without having to go on a rampage for being treated so badly, which I think is still going on today. I mean, because, you know, I think I read something recently. It's like where are the Hispanic leaders, there is no voice. They just had Reverend Sharpton go to Phoenix and tell everybody, well, you guys should have been marching all along and, you know, what's happened, I'm not quite sure. But I don't consider myself to be a leader. I think at an early age in high school and going through all this kind of training I had thought about that idea, that approach.

00:19:33 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

One of the things that altered my mind was, again about the same time as *REGENERACION* was I was tapped on the shoulder by a mysterious man literally who says really, he tells, he goes, you know, you're Gamboa, right? I go, yeah. He says you should go to the Federal Building and buy a report titled *SUBVERSION IN THE "NEW LEFT,"* and then he disappeared. I said well, I wonder what that's all about. I went to the federal building, bought it.

00:19:57 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

In that publication I read a big long testimony against me in which the foldout listed me as one of the top 100 subversives in the United States at the time, along with very high profile people. In the end, if you were to look at that list one more time you could check off all the people that were murdered, pushed off cliffs, poisoned, and died in jail. When I read the testimony it was all falsified information because they accredited me with being members of one or two groups and one group that didn't even exist.

00:20:27 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And the two groups that did exist, they claim that they were more dangerous than the Black Panthers and Communist party combined. This was from the discredited PDID, which was a domestic intelligence gathering department of the LAPD in cooperation with the LAUSD and through the federal agencies.

00:20:54 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And it was all part of the COINTELPRO program, which was headed up by J. Edgar Hoover, and all of it false. It was just false smear campaign to discredit and to make people with certain views look bad and basically to do bad things to them, to punish them. I felt—because this was all during the era where people are being assassinated—it wasn't exactly my role. I'm just not one of these people, that I'm not about to lead you but I might suggest a few things.

00:21:27 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I might provide you with a few things to look at and I felt that was more my role and in fact even more so nowadays than earlier. I think I even, you said, take that on a little bit with the art role where I felt that I needed to explain things, but now there's a more, more than adequate number of people that can explain anything. In fact, people that often explain to me what I probably meant to say. Sometimes they're right, and sometimes they're so completely wrong that I just must agree.

00:22:00 JESSE LERNER

So we were talking about photography, your mom...

00:22:02 HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Oh, photography. I'm sorry, yeah.

00:22:04

JESSE LERNER

You start doing photography around this time, right?

00:22:07

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Oh, no, I think I borrowed that Brownie and I shot photographs in the 4th grade on a field trip and I kind of got into it a little bit, and then the day that I used a 35mm camera for the first time ever, the deal was that Garfield High was known—and I've written about this before—I referred to Garfield high as a breeder reactor of Chicano culture.

00:22:33

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

It was one of these places that really focused on the art, on the music, on fashion, on style, low-riding. It was right off of Whittier Boulevard and the development of new words and the new ways of doing things and then it would spread out to the various barrios and neighborhoods all across the country but it always started there. Part of it was that everyone wanted to look beautiful, and of course this is all during the 60's and you had sort of this influence of pop culture that everyone was going to be mod.

00:23:22

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

During this period everybody was interested in the pop culture which was a representation on TV, the rock n' roll but there was also Motown, and everyone looked kind of very excessive in a certain way and so as it turns out, Garfield had a handful of these very beautiful girls that would all hangout and pose for everybody on the front lawn, and I was one of these kind of crazy musician guys. I kind of identified as a musician during this period of time, and I used to tell the guys, I said, well, boy, I want to meet all those girls.

00:23:57

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I want to be their boyfriend, all of them and I said but there's no way they'll ever even talk to me because they like the guys with the cars, they like the guys with the this, and I've got nothing and I've never had a penny in my pocket to begin with. But looking at them I realize that what they really needed was affirmation that they really were that beautiful and I found someone with a 35mm camera.

00:24:20

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I figured out a way to get some film. I knew someone that knew how to develop the film and that's why I brought up the Galaxy earlier. I knew a friend of mine that had a Galaxy, a red Galaxy with a convertible top and I said listen, just give me a ride and I'm going to snap a few pictures, and I snapped a few pictures, had this guy that owed me a favor develop all these prints, and I introduce to all these girls by giving them all photographs, and one of those girls was Patssi Valdez.

00:24:43 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And another one of the girls that appeared in a couple of my videos and it was Lorraine Ordaz, and then another girl that eventually became my girlfriend anyway for a little while and as it turns out these were kind of... they actually were the artists. They were the poets and they were the performers and that was the way they were able to exhibit themselves in this venue and over a period of time maybe three of them, I actually wound up working with them.

00:25:07 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

They were part of the early part of the group. Patssi, of course, I worked with much longer and Lorraine Ordaz who I was able to work but she passed away a few years ago. But, you know, a very intense performer. So that was my first photograph roll of film. But I didn't return to it for many, many, many years because that must have been '68. So then the next time I actually used a camera was in '72 and I somehow—and I haven't talked about this yet=

00:25:37 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

—but after high school... high school graduation was kind of an interesting thing. When they had the walkouts, I was in the 11th grade. Everybody walked out. Within a few weeks everybody walked back in. I never went back in. I missed the entire 11th grade. I just never went, I never went. Then somewhere at the beginning of the 12th grade I was at a park with a friend of mine who was kind of a brilliant musician guy and we were kind of practicing music and stuff.

00:26:08 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And these two guys came by, they were high and they stabbed him in the arm with a bottle and as it turns out a teacher just passed by, saw this attack and next thing you know we're surrounded by all the authorities from the school. They dragged me back in school and they said listen, we want you to come to school. You're supposed to be going to high school and they kind of stuck this deal with me that as long as I didn't organize or whatever and if I took certain courses they would just give me units or whatever.

00:26:37 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I really didn't care. I said, well I'll just go back and hang around and I then actually organized to change the dress code and a few other things that were at the school. In the end, still had straight F's. Nonetheless, they gave me units. They gave me fictitious credits and so I graduated high school with a GPA of 1.1 which was enough to get me on stage and out of there, and I felt that part of this was actually— the idea was that once you were out of high school you were then capable of being drafted.

00:27:14 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

Except I was at the age of 17, which was under the age of being draft age. At the high school, during the graduation, the way it used to work is you could get your diploma from the principal and when you got off stage you received a letter from the draft board, which is what was going on that day. So a lot of my friends on the day of graduation were finding out they were going to go to Vietnam in a week or two. I didn't get one because I was only 17 years old.

00:27:39 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

A couple days later I was roaming the streets of East L.A. and I bumped into this little guy with a beanie, looked kind of like a gangster kind of guy and he came up to me and he goes, don't you want to go to college, man. Hey, I said where do you want to go? And I go, well, what? What are you talking about?

00:27:56 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And he goes here, fill this out. He was a recruiter for EOP program which is the Equal Opportunity Program. It was just started and you'd have to kind of look at the history of what was going on here in L.A. at the time. Cal State Northridge, which was then known as San Fernando Valley State College, had had riots and they had funneled all the state's money into one college for that summer. They needed 500 African American and Chicano students, split gender-wise to fill this campus residential hall.

00:28:28 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I filled out the form and two days later I was a college student. completely ill-prepared and put in this place where they mixed blacks and Chicanos together which we really were not... that was not the experience for both groups at that point. Of the people that were in that building, quite literally were not exactly the kind of people you'd want to share a room with anyway because they were just grabbed off the streets. But some of those people it turns out to be a great opportunity for them really.

00:28:58 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

Because some of them went on to become deans. Some professors, lawyers, filmmakers, you know, it was the perfect opportunity for many people, and for me it was an opportunity to get my a student deferment. So when I turned 18 and I got called to the draft board. I actually was not going to go to Vietnam.

00:29:25 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And that was my sole motivation to stay in college until the end of the war, and of which again I never passed a class because I just hung around, you could just, back then, you know, nothing was computerized. You just filled out a form and you were in school.

00:29:40

JESSE LERNER

So I'm confused. This was a summer program but then you stayed on...

00:29:43

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

No, no, actually I stayed there only one summer at Northridge in 1969. I just hated the place because nothing was there. It was desolate. It was unknown to me and I switched slots with my friend John Ortiz who decided, and he had been one of the other editors for *REGENERACION* and he decided to go there and then I decided to go to Cal State L.A., and it was by going to Cal State L.A. that I then walked across the freeway.

00:30:09

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And the next thing you know I'm in City Terrace, and that's where Willie Herron was and I got to meet Humberto Sandoval and through them I got to meet my ex-wife because they had gone to elementary school with her and so, you know.

00:30:23

JESSE LERNER

And that's around the time that you begin to collaborate with them.

00:30:27

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

1971 was when we first did a group in performance and in 1972 when we first worked with a camera. And it was as a result of me being student, I received—I was always out again seeking monies which was one of the other reasons I wasn't into school and I managed somehow or another to receive—they had a federally funded program called Model Cities in which all of a sudden I had several thousand dollars in my possession, and I immediately went to a camera store with Willie Herron and Humberto Sandoval.

00:31:02

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

They came along with me, and I bought a camera and I bought a hundred rolls of film and at the end of the hundred rolls of film that I shot, two of them actually won awards and I figured I could take pictures.

00:31:15

JESSE LERNER

Because the *L.A. TIMES* gave you an award.

00:31:17

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Yeah, and then there was another thing here in the city somewhere, and then but the idea of using the photograph, photographing ourselves, we started doing that very early on. I had been part of the performance piece with Willie and Gronk, "Stations of the Cross," and I didn't have a camera there but the idea that stuck in my mind was that we don't have the images. We don't have access to the images and what's the purpose of this if we don't have the images.

00:31:46 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Then when I turned it around with the camera I found that the idea of photographing was one thing to document, but it was also very important for me to control and to direct, and so to put people in place and suggest and intake other ideas. But it was always the idea that anything that existed in front was not by accident, it had to be there in order for it to be composed properly. And unfortunately, most of the Asco images disappeared.

00:32:15 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

This all had to do with some— in the late 70's they came out with these slide sheets where you were supposed to put your slides in and then about 1978, they put out a warning that they'd used the wrong plastic and all the emulsion would stick to the plastic and when you'd pull it out it was a clear piece of celluloid.

00:32:34 **JESSE LERNER**

But you also told me the story about burning...

00:32:37 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Well, yeah, I'd burn my own stuff for many years actually. I wanted to eliminate my trail. Yeah, I destroyed many, many, many documents and many, many images for many years and many, many writings and people like Chon Noriega was able to assemble from a few scraps of paper at the bottom of a box, he was able to assemble my book of 500 pages and other people were able to locate things. I guess I wasn't very good at destroying evidence.

00:33:05 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

But some of the things just needed to go and I guess, you know, for people that are into research and all that, I mean, that's the antithesis of what people do like that. But, I guess nowadays if I do destroy materials that I put on a wig and I go to another city and throw things off a cliff, you know.

00:33:28 **JESSE LERNER**

Around the same time early 70's, you also began to work with Super 8?

00:33:32 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Yeah.

00:33:34 **JESSE LERNER**

Are there Super 8 films—and I have questions about these—because it's not clear, you know, sometimes you're in the shots. You're really not...

00:33:41 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Well, yeah, we'd put them on a tripod.

00:33:42 **JESSE LERNER**

Okay.

00:33:43

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

If I'm in the shot. So it was Willie Herron's camera and I also had another camera. I don't know where I got that camera from. But we never really edited anything other than—the only piece that ever became edited is as a sort of a linear narrative piece was Humberto Sandoval's *SR. TERESHKOVA* piece which didn't have sound. But the other pieces were clips and snippets of things and they were shown here and there.

00:34:12

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

Again, they kept getting cut, cut, cut and stuck together and in the end there's on reel that Chon has possession of, I have to get it back, and it was shown at the Phantom Sightings and then I guess for this Asco exhibit I let Rita and Ondine that I actually have an untouched 3 minute reel of us on the beach somewhere doing something. But there wasn't really all that much Super 8 shot. But every once in a while it was incorporated.

00:34:42

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

Shot and then used at a party where it would go on a loop to illustrate in the background. The same with the slides were used that way. So quiet often when we'd have different events or go somewhere it was used live on the scene but without any care for the original source material which ultimately would be damaged or destroyed, and because everyone was drunk or high or angry or in love or tug of wars and, you know, cover your body with things and tape it up and whatever.

00:35:10

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And then use and mix media pieces and the things would get destroyed in the process, and there was no real respect for the actual object that in the end was really, you know, the source. So it would vanish. But it was very much like the way the people were also because many of the people that were kind of peripheral to Asco, they're all dead. Some of them just died recently actually.

00:35:34

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

So it's the idea of the people that kind of had the sensibility of wanting to live and wanting to stay here. But many people didn't have that desire actually. In fact, many of the people that actually died really didn't want to be here.

00:35:50

JESSE LERNER

A lot of those snippets, although you say they were never designed to be shown as a film, it does seem like there is editing though, right?

00:35:57

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Well, yeah, I put them together, yeah, sure. Eventually, eventually I put them all together, yeah.

00:36:01 **JESSE LERNER**

So that was done later after these— what you were showing at the parties was just the raw footage.

00:36:06 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Yeah, like I think the piece that was shown in Phantom Sightings, I believe it was Willie Herron was looking over my shoulder and we kind of put it together in 1974 actually or '75.

00:36:21 **JESSE LERNER**

Where it's the *INSTANT MURAL* and intercut with,,

00:36:22 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Yeah, yeah, and then Willie Herron has footage that he has possession of and I don't know how he put it together but he has footage of the *WALKING MURAL*.

00:36:34 **JESSE LERNER**

There's a little bit of that at the end of that reel.

00:36:37 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Oh, is there?

00:36:37 **JESSE LERNER**

Or just a shot.

00:36:38 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Oh, yeah, I'm not sure.

00:36:39 **JESSE LERNER**

Then I think there's a shot of, maybe there's like a shot of the Last Supper after--

00:36:45 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Right, yeah, there's some of that.

00:36:46 **JESSE LERNER**

It's like [unintelligible] but it's not clear, you know, is this an edit or was that the last thing and then they filmed it all and then ran out.

00:36:55 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Well, again, I'm not sure it's all things that were— I got to tell you it's probably— all that film was gathered together from things as I was grabbing as leaving and escaping somewhere, and then put it together, you know. So that was sort of what it was all about.

00:37:12 **JESSE LERNER**

And there was a lot more that got burnt or some more of it...?

00:37:14

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Yeah, a lot of it got burned, a lot of it got destroyed. Then some of it was destroyed for me. So it'd depend who I was hanging around with and who was there and who was not and where things were left. But I can't imagine there's much left of anything that's hasn't been seen already. And Rita Gonzalez and Ondine Chavoya recently saw maybe a handful of images that nobody had ever seen. But at some point I gave away maybe a thousand images to members of Asco.

00:37:42

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And I don't know what they did with them either. So I don't know if they took care of them or...

00:37:46

JESSE LERNER

I think part of their project is doing that detective work.

00:37:49

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Right, yeah, that's not my...yeah.

00:37:52

JESSE LERNER

Tracking down all the lost pieces. But it sounds like that the exception then would be the *SR. TERESHKOVA* piece.

00:38:06

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Yeah, because that was written and directed by Humberto Sandoval and under his supervision and he has a completely different sensibility regarding product, object, and ownership.

00:38:18

JESSE LERNER

Can you talk a little bit about working with him on that?

00:38:21

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Oh well, Humberto probably is the only one that had kind of a little bit more a theatrical training. He had this idea he wanted to do a story about an old man that's lost his youth that finds inspiration in a mannequin that then comes to life and relives and in the end they exchange places in a way. But the old man goes out in the street and he's somebody that starts committing crimes immediately against people and doing different things, and in the end he's actually punished.

00:38:56 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

On some level it's a Catholic story. It was kind of fun because there is a moment where Willie Herron and Humberto Sandoval jump into the Hollenbeck Lake and then there was great discord in the end as to who could see these pictures and who couldn't, and it was one of the first— it sort of touched on the idea that Asco would eventually break up. That caused kind of the mix-up. I always wanted to show certain things, it was decided you have control, authorship.

00:39:29 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

In the end it was Humberto Sandoval's piece, of course. But then there were always rumblings as to what's going to happen to the group because we never really functioned exactly as a group. We would just kind of coalesce together and hang out, and this idea that we were a collective was never the case. It was never that idea. It was never formal and we were kind of almost acted—and I've mentioned this before in writing—that we were kind of almost like a surrogate family.

00:39:57 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

In the end I was the only one that actually had a father that was present. I was the only who never shaved off his eyebrows; certain things that had I done that I would have beaten to death, you know, by my uncles as my father would have held me down, I think, you know, deservedly so at that point. But this idea that I could push on some levels but I couldn't join on others. Patssi too, had a very strict mother. She could do only certain things, under certain conditions.

00:40:22 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Because we were all very young at that point still and we had sort of these relationships with family and peer pressure and then, Willie Herron had a different kind of upbringing, very strict upbringing and Humberto Sandoval had a very extremely harsh upbringing, probably even more so than Willie Herron actually. So all together we had all experienced different levels of personal violence, social violence. But in the end we all kind of had a very similar response was to laugh at it as a way of diminishing its effects.

00:41:15 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And that's kind of where we had all common ground and that's actually where we actually all agreed to work, because I don't think we all agreed politically. We didn't have the same understanding of what art was supposed to be or who we were supposed to be. We just knew that it was fun to laugh and that laughing felt good and that feeling good was something to laugh about. So that's what was sort of the primary goal and then that was sort of my theme from a very early age and that's what I'd constantly push and I still do.

[END TAPE 2]

TAPE 3: HARRY GAMBOA JR

00:02:59

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

What happened was in— well we all met, Asco, like I said, I've met Patssi, all of us met as teenagers and then we went into our young 20s and all of us were very energized and doing a lot of different things but because of the kind of lifestyles that we all had, Patssi went off and did a certain kind of work for a living, I went off and did a, literally a blue collar job for a while where I was a member of a union and I did all kinds of work.

00:03:32

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And then I went off and got married at a certain point and had a son and Willie Herron, the same thing, got married and Humberto Sandoval also got involved in the corporate world, and so we all just kind of went off and got a real life in a way but still doing work every so often. Then it turns out that maybe by the time we were heading towards the late 20s and early 30s we found that we really wanted to do even more work. But by that time we had kind of transformed a bit.

00:04:05

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

In terms of where we were going. We were getting further and further away from what had actually bonded us together which had been, you know, troubled youth basically. We were no longer that but yet we all kind of had this way of working with each other and I always had this idea of bringing in people, and I used to be much more random in picking up people. I would just actually pick people based on their image and my ratio was I'd pick one person that was truly an artist and the other one was a criminal.

00:04:37

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

It was a bad idea to go that route because 50 percent of those people were the kind of people you didn't want to really be around except once they were brought in they'd hang around forever. As it turns out they were not of the kind of character that I was really interested in having around. Then in the end, you know, there were a handful of people that actually were somewhat productive and participated in some of the early works.

00:07:36 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I do one walk through, curtain raises, it's 500 people in the audience and it goes on for an hour and a half and nobody even knows the difference and it was never performed and it's never to be seen again. I was almost like being shot out of a cannon. Again, going back to my initial influences of the live TV, Buster Keaton, all these cartoons, it was always very cartoony in a way. Also incorporating slide images and video imagery at this point projected.

00:08:04 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And some of the early videos, like the first part of the collection, almost all the videos are scripted actually, *IMPERFECTO*, *VAPORS*, you know, *BLANKS*, all of them are scripted and then in the 90s maybe if I'm not mistaken I think it's only one or two are scripted actually. The rest are kind of improvised like for instance *L.A. FAMILIA*, there was no script but it was always something that was prompted. So one thing would lead to another.

00:08:32 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And I'd be behind the camera and say well now you do this and let's see where it goes and then shoot a little bit and that video took a year and a half to film and my son grew a foot and a half and Humberto Sandoval had nearly died from some food poisoning and he starts off skinny and in the end he gains weight and, you know, it goes through this period of time which is much different than many of the other things.

00:08:53 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

Because most of my other videos had been shot in a day and edited the next day, and then on cable TV it's the following day. It sort of changed my approach to doing things and so now even with the writing the way it is now, it's still—I've been working recently on a photo novella which will eventually involve text and which will eventually involve design. But I kind of do it the inverse way, I gather images first and I gather performers first that are then required for the images and it takes a long period of time to get everyone together.

00:09:34 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

The way of organizing and working with performers and nowadays I won't work with anyone that identifies themselves as being an actor. That just automatically excludes you from participating in my work because that means you have preconceived notions of what you're expecting from me as a director. In fact, I only work with people that are not interested in any of it. They must just show up, you know, and I feed everybody, I take care of everybody and everyone's treated very well and then I ask people just to do something.

00:10:03 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And my shooting moments are literally take two, three minutes. But which means I have to have many of them over a long period of time to create one piece. That automatically excludes nefarious activities amongst the different performers. It excludes people having conflicts of any sort and in the end no one has a bad feeling and everyone's happy, which is quite opposite is what happened with Asco and the second part of Asco. You know, not to mention the— maybe there was one artist, I won't mention his name

00:10:37 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

He's extremely well known. He's, you know, just a criminal and fortunately I had a sort of philosophical re-examination of who I am and that's why I, you know, that's why he's happy.

00:10:56 **JESSE LERNER**

There's several things in what you just said that I want to go back to and earlier on you mentioned, you know, Caló and this sort of playfulness with language, reading the dictionary as a kid and as a project. When we get to this radio work and stage work. clearly language comes front and center as one of our primary concerns. So, can you talk a little bit about the development of your interest with language?

00:11:25 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Well, you know, my interest in language started off with the word Spanish written on that cone. It's like I said, I remember thinking well I'm going to speak English better than this teacher. I'm going to learn how to use it better than anybody, and then in fact, I'm going to learn how to use it even better than the people that are on TV. Of course, you know, you have these people— Betty Davis, for instance, great.

00:11:47 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

You know, she'd go onto these live TV shows and she was as witty without a script as she was with a script. The same with, Kirk Douglas, all these different big named actors, and then again to every once in a while be on the streets and like I, I don't know. I saw Kirk Douglas one day and I saw Lucille Ball drunk at the Farmer's Market and to see all these different people under different situations and realize that, boy, I guess it's all acting.

00:12:17 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I might be able to pull it off myself, you know. The idea of combining words and playing with words was always my concern because if I could trick you, it was always that same thing. If I got you looking at the spinning wheel, by the time it stopped spinning, I'm no longer around, and I've also changed your mind about whatever your original intent was. That was always part of something that was integrated into my work and continues to be.

00:12:49 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

So and the idea of language, it was like, and I've—again, I've written this years ago—but it was the idea of like how to turn the English language into a weapon, as a social weapon. One that would not only defend but one that offend and one that would leave a scar, and that's what I was quite interested in and of not only would I leave a scar but that scar would have my name on it so you knew who gave it to you.

00:13:18 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I guess that goes back to my uncles. But it was that kind of mentality of the work, I wanted to make my work. I think early on I was a little bit more concerned with the crystallized precision of the language and the effect and I think I've loosened up a little bit because actually, you know, Chon Noriega will tell you that when— I met Chon in 1991. He was working on his dissertation. We got a chance to talk.

00:13:50 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

We got to know each other and over a period of time we'd have coffee all the time. We got along really well. He's very witty, a sharp guy, of course, a brilliant guy but I'd say oh, I'm working on this, I'm working on that and not really aware of the fact that his whole thing initially at Stanford was literature in the first place. He had taken an interest in the writing and all that and of course he's got his, you know, he's a big— he's like Napoleon, right.

00:14:15 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

He's got this big strategy and finally in the end, and the whole time I'm never telling him that every weekend I'm going to my mother's house and I'm burning everything. I'm having bonfires of everything. So finally he says, well, you know, Stanford University is interested in collecting your papers. I said well, what's that? And he says oh, well, they're even willing to pay by linear feet. I said, well, you know, Chon, I've just burned everything and I, maybe have a foot left.

00:14:38 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I'll save that for you and he came by and quite literally it was just a box or so, whatever it was, a couple boxes and going through all the papers, he's there documenting everything, and quite literally he'd pull a little pair of tweezers and pull it out and he goes, what's this? And then maybe there was a scribble and I'd say, oh, that was from a script and so and so was on it and he'd— so anyway at the end of that he kept asking a little bit more questions.

00:15:00 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And we met for a couple more years and then finally one day we're going to go have coffee because we would have coffee maybe every two weeks or so. He goes, oh, you should just stop by my place today. I want to show you something. I went to his apartment and there was a stack of paper this high, I don't know, three or four feet high, and he goes, there's your book, and I go what? He goes, yeah, this is all your material.

00:15:21 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

You know, I took one of your titles and that's the title to the book and see what you think. I said well, Chon, that's a big joke. It's very funny. Let's go eat. I go, I'll take a look at it the day before it goes to the damn printer. How's that? I'll actually sit down with you and I'll read it, and I didn't let me take a look at it, and sure enough came the day whatever it was in 19...I forget what year it was.

00:15:43 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Time to look at the book and we sat and I read it from beginning to end and I was completely astounded by how many times I had repeated myself. I felt as though this book drew the line, a demarcation of my ignorance and that's what I was left with that this was all I've talked about in my whole lifetime. I went away completely demoralized and I couldn't dig a whole bigger than that. But of course what the book was composed of was all these pieces that I had written for a magazine that never got published.

00:16:19 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

For an audience of people of 20 people for something that I read somewhere, kicked out of town somewhere like Mesa, Arizona. I was run out of town at gunpoint once by the mayor there years ago. It's a good place to get run out town, right, you know, because we're going to come back there one day. In the end I kind of was able to rethink it. It almost seemed like jazz riffs.

00:16:46 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

They came back because some of the things that I wrote that were for a particular audience, the next audience had never heard it so I would incorporate it into that piece. Because there were no venues, I'd send out to—nobody ever published anything and for me to consider that all this evidence would be put together in one piece, one block, and then the resulting effect actually was when my book came out. I didn't write for a very long time. I had to rethink and then it was sort of this, again, it was sort of the recognition that there are people out there that have gone to school.

00:17:23 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

That whatever, and it had happened one or two times where I'm just joking and having a cup of coffee with someone; the next time I heard that was I read it as a footnote somewhere, that all of a sudden anything I might say might be a footnote, might be whatever, and then I started playing around with that idea and I started telling people lies and then those became footnotes too. So then I had to kind of pullback and reconsider the way I was going to approach writing.

00:17:49 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And just spent a lot more time doing other things and just thinking about it and it wasn't really until maybe a couple years ago that I started writing a little bit and then more recently I've decided that's what I'm going to do and I've been doing that, so it's a whole different kind of body of work but paying a little bit different attention to it, and you might actually get a chance to hear, I recorded 12 radio plays last year actually with my troupe but they just haven't been edited together yet.

00:18:17 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

But my whole approach is more to dealing with the internet and so my audio performers, you'll get a chance just to download and hear the plays. The same with much of the text work, might sort of be there with this on demand publishing or things I give away for free on the internet. Or through printed material that's also distributed for free, just tossed away like confetti. So that's the writing. The idea of entering sort of mainstream, I've still have the same response.

00:18:53 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

There is no response, so rather than to waste any time doing that, my concern isn't any way for, it never has been, commercial success and on some level I'm kind of free to write and say anything I want because there is no reward anyway.

00:19:12 **JESSE LERNER**

How and when did you start working in video?

00:19:18 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

I started working in video while *IMPERFECTO* was my original training project, it was my first video project. and I worked on that over a period of weekends out of a— when cable television was first appeared on the landscape, they had an agreement that they should provide public access which meant that people from the neighborhood could have access to the video equipment, produce work, and it would show on that system. So there was one called Falcon Cable Corporation, had different regions in southern California.

00:19:54 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

One was in San Gabriel Valley, one was in Malibu, one was somewhere else. I don't know where, maybe the South Bay. I got into a little training program over a weekend where they showed me how to operate the $\frac{3}{4}$ inch and they had the Betamax equipment initially and how to transfer it. I could make a product and then show it on TV. So I went off and did this piece, *IMPERFECTO* which was performed by Humberto Sandoval as a character being released from a psycho ward and confronting people around the world, around L.A.

00:20:35 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

In the end we did this piece and it was presented on cable TV. I must have made about 20 or 30 or 40 of these videos. Most were all five minutes long but of that the only ones that exist are the ones that are in Chon's collections because some were recorded over, some were destroyed, and some were burned actually. I burned them. They incorporate the various people that were part of Asco, some of the early ones. But what had happened was there's one called *BABY KAKE* that has Barbara Carrasco my wife, and Humberto Sandoval about a single mother and son.

00:21:12 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And then the dad comes in and then we have sort of this mythical creature who's like a Marie Antoinette, this six foot tall transgender character. In the end they showed that video, I think it was like ten times a day on this station that went throughout—and it reached a million people or so—ten times a day for three or four years, and it wasn't until the population demographic shifted that people complained. What started happening was more of the corporatization of everything.

00:21:43 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And they figured out that if they didn't repair the equipment then no one would make videos and there would be nothing to show. Then slowly but surely it got replaced with religious programming and I stopped doing that for them and I didn't do video for a little bit of time until I purchased a very expensive camera I guess towards the end of the 90s or so. And then I shot a handful of videos and that composed the second collection.

00:22:12 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

But again never with any money, no financial support, it was just to do things and to get it out there and that's the way it's been done.

00:22:23 **JESSE LERNER**

You mentioned that the Super 8 films, if those showed it was at a party kind of in the background. These videos though from the 80's, those start to circulate more in L.A. Freewaves and kind of...

00:22:36

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Yeah, I started sending them out because it was much easier to duplicate videos so I started mailing them actually out and I think there was one—and I have the listing somewhere—but there was this idea that there was one non-profit organization that would have access to satellite distribution and I sent it to them and they would distribute it and it was shown all around the world, some of my videos. All of these things were produced for like \$20 dollars, you know.

00:23:02

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

So to have millions of people look at your videos for \$20 dollars— which actually went back to the idea of the no movie, this idea that you could make something without any income and still have sort of a viable presence out in the world, and that kind of goes back even to the idea of mowing the lawn, looking like an arch criminal but like a beautiful movie star at the same time. It's the idea of doing, making, and being seen and being heard without having to invest yourself in the system that requires you to obey certain rules. So it's all about again leaving your mark.

00:23:41

JESSE LERNER

Did any of this work, I mean, I think some of it began to enter, if not into experimental film circles, at least kind of into more of a art context?

00:23:51

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Yeah.

00:23:54

JESSE LERNER

I do remember, I think I must have been in college or something going to self-help sometime in the late 80's and they were showing something of yours and something of Juan Garza's. It was having, you know, it was more of art gallery, not experimental film world per se, but entering into a gallery context or being exhibited there.

00:24:17

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Right. Well, again, my introduction to art galleries went back in the 70's and then, I was one of the founding members of LACE and so my introduction to sort of mainstream gallery structure was kind of hard. It was letting the bull into the china shop but before you knew it I knew where all the nice teacups were at, you know. This idea of being able to direct information to certain people, that went back to the mid-70's when I got involved in the mail art thing was to find people that seemed like they could be receptive and if not they would share.

00:24:55 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

So the idea with the video was that I'd make 20 copies and then just mail them out and see what happened with them, and other people would then copy and it would go and take on a life of their own. Through L.A. Freewaves, of course, it was more direct. This was a much later period of time. The idea of them being screened elsewhere again, they just started showing different cable corporations there because they didn't have enough of a public access to screen. They would show mine there too.

00:25:27 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I'm not exactly sure how people found all that material actually. I'm really not sure. I just know that I would always—and I still continue to do that—I would always make things and give them away and the thing like with David Avalos giving away his money at the border, I haven't done exactly that but there have been times where I will like something, buy a hundred copies and just give them away. For instance, the dictionary for instance, I always had a fond thing for that.

00:25:58 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I've always gone out and I think there was one year I got a grant somewhere and I must have spent a thousand bucks on English/Spanish dictionaries and stood on 7th and Broadway and gave them to every single person that passed by. The idea was to kind of bring Latino people into the dialogue and I gave some white people that so they could learn some Spanish too.

00:26:22 **JESSE LERNER**

Let's talk about some of the... because if we're talking about this period now, 80's, 90's, there are a number of photographic series that start around this time, right? Can you say something about your work [unintelligible] experience?

00:26:37 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Well, I think it was not too long ago, I've had these really strange encounters. Recently someone almost looked like they wanted to break my arm off because they wanted to nail me down like are you a photographer, are you a writer, are you a filmmaker, what are you? I said well, you know, I kind of do this and that. When I have money I take black and white photographs. When I have a little bit of money I get my people together and we make a video.

00:27:00 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

If I have no money I write, but the black and white photography it's I guess has been what has entered mainstream museum more than anything else actually, very early on. I think I started doing black and white photography with the idea that there would be a conceptual split. One would be the sort of the performance work, one would be the documentary work. After a bit of life and living out there and I realized that it's impossible to tell the two apart. In fact, I'll take a photograph of something that's actually happening.

00:27:35 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And it looks so performed and it's the other way around. I can direct something and it looks like it's an accident and you can't tell. So all of a sudden my work and my understanding of my role in photography changed and one of the things that I became interested in was documenting and creating sort of a vast body of work of photographing Chicano men and this was all based on a radio announcement I heard after a conference of Chicano art and Chicano intellectualism. There were all these people that were sitting at a table.

00:28:06 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And everyone was eating and everybody was drinking and everyone drove away in their nice cars and I was the only person that was unemployed at the time and not agreeing that everything was going great for everybody, at least not for me. When I got back to my car and I turn on the radio, the announcement was that, the announcer goes on, he goes, and be aware and on the lookout for the Chicano male. He's armed and— and then I just switched it off.

00:28:32 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I said, who are they talking about? My son, my dad, my uncles, my friends, somebody out there they're going to get and I know how easy it is to just throw out a general description and then everyone's going to get rounded up. There's been many times, even with the other Asco members, where we've been just stopped on the streets by the police officers, even on the day that we did the spray paint at the museum.

00:28:51 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

The big event I always remember that we were going home and we got stopped by the police and they had guns on our head and they let us go because they got a real police call that day. To me that was more dramatic than the spray paint but that wasn't documented and that other one was. But this idea that I would start in concentric social circles, because I wanted to photograph men who I knew personally and the idea that that would be the connection, was me. They knew me, I knew them, they may or may not know each other.

00:29:24 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

But in the sense they actually form a community or they play a role and the kinds of people would also define, the kind of people that are in whatever my social strata is with the people that are of interest to me, and so over the years I photographed pretty close to about a 150 men and captured them almost all in the same kind of pose, in an exterior setting, lit by available light to create sort of this film noir effect, where I shoot them midway height level with a 24mm lens.

00:29:56 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

But it looks like you're looking at them straight on but actually you're below their gaze so they're gazing down on you but it looks like they're looking at your eye. So you're hit with this idea that someone's kind of looking at you down and staring at you and it provokes people sometimes that they feel like they're being threatened because what falls into play many times has been people's preconceived notions of negative stereotypes. In fact it's got to be this place, it was in Phoenix. I showed my work at one point, maybe 20 images on the wall, and I went off to go change clothes for the opening reception..

00:30:26 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And when I came back to the museum they wouldn't let me in. I looked too much like the guys on the wall. So finally I had to explain I was the artist and then when I went in there some came up to me and said, you must tell us what is this gang, who are they? I said, well, you know, you must read the labels because that's going to tell you exactly who they are.

00:30:50 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Because all of the titles of each photograph is the name of the individual and their self-identified profession. And many of the people I know are writers, artists, lawyers, educators, and if you go on down the line there isn't a gang. In fact, none of them knew each other on the wall and that's you telling me we're a gang and me telling you that you're wrong.

00:31:14 **JESSE LERNER**

You mentioned your role and the origins of LACE, right? Museum grant and El Monte, and maybe talk more generally about this relationship to institutions?

00:31:29 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Well, there was a time period where, again this would be sort of the late 70's. I had already worked at a blue collar job. I guess I made blue collar existence job— good union job that I decided I didn't want to work at anymore. Then I was kind of unemployed for a bit but I was doing a lot of freelance work at the time. The freelance work was much more lucrative than hanging out and doing other things.

00:31:58 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Then I heard through Gronk that there had been sort of this non-profit organization that had to leave El Monte because they had painted a mural. He and Robert Gil de Montes had painted a mural that was condemned and this is also the city where that they had hanged Mexicans from the telephone poles for many years and so they had to leave, and it was a connection with this guy who had been sort of a county administrator.

00:32:22 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Somehow he had this idea, dreamed to start an art center with a group of people. He kind of helped guide it, was able to refund money from another organization that sort of had their non-profit status and so through them we were able to get a CETA grant which everybody was working at minimum wage which is not enough money to work anyway. But the idea, the concept of taking over 7700 square feet and transforming it into a gallery was one thing.

00:32:55 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

But once that was done, after a year of cleaning up, what happened was the introduction of presenting art in a space in downtown Los Angeles and inviting people at large into a place where you could bring representatives from all the demographic representation in L.A., and it was one of the first times I think that people gathered together in such ways for art. You found people from the Westside, from Beverly Hills, from the beach area, from East L.A., from South Central, from the Valley, all coming in, all with different points of view.

00:33:34 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Different ethnicities, different social strata in there having a great time and quite often it was combined with a music of the day which was often punk. Punk and sort of this very crazy hard rock and it was the introduction of people finding out that we are all in this together and the only other time that people get together like that is when they're on the freeway or during a riot. For here it turned out to be something, and it was also the inkling of the strategies on how organize the situation.

00:34:08 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Because in the end what happened was the concept was developed but then people usurped the power, funded their own non-profit organization by taking the name and then fired everybody. Of course, then that for me was sort of— I had been familiar with these kind of purges early on and it left sort of a negative taste for a little bit but then the place itself became interesting and I think someone like Joy Silverman, who took it over at some point, made it a little bit more interesting.

00:34:35 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

But you know, I wasn't exactly ever really truly involved again at that point. But there was a way to kind of— I think LACE served to put art on the map of downtown L.A. early on, and it had to do with some of the projects that both Gronk, and I, and Willie Herron actually worked there too, so—and Robert Gil de Montes—and then a handful of the other people that were part of the organization, a guy by the name of Ron Reeder and Marilyn Kemppanien a few people that were part of this group.

00:35:04 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

You know initially it started there and then as it turns out, of course, some of the most famous people in the art world pass through there at some point. So I won't mention them, give them the free publicity. But many people that showed up there that didn't have a penny eventually wound up on the front cover of *ART IN AMERICA*. So, you know...

00:35:23 **JESSE LERNER**

Can you talk a little bit about that downtown scene in L.A.?

00:35:29 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Well, I actually spent probably 25 years of my life, this was midway during that period of time where I was in downtown L.A. every single day of my life for 25 years, and for most of that period of time taking photographs actually, every single day. So I was sort of on this vision-oriented kind of approach and got to see sort of the transition of the population, the decay of the buildings, the way people would behave with the each other.

00:36:00 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

When the new immigrants came from Central America during the revolutions and wars, I mean, the first set of families, they almost all showed up overnight, sleeping in doorways, and then next thing, you know, some of those kids grew up and they're speaking English. Then I was there last week in downtown L.A. on Broadway and there was a million people there protesting for their rights and these are all the kids that grew up here in L.A., you know.

00:36:22 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

But the whole city transformed. During this period of time, almost every day a new language being inserted too. So like now we have a 100 languages where at some point maybe there was 10 or 20 at the most. Things just started changing, coalescing, and maybe when I stopped hanging around in downtown L.A. it was in a steep decline, and I went there the other day and someone was walking a poodle and it was going to go get its nails done. So yeah, it's not exactly the downtown of old.

00:37:01

JESSE LERNER

Let's see, in addition to LACE, did you have other experiences with Los Angeles arts institutions?

00:37:10

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Well, I've got to mention a woman by the name of Josine Ianco-Starrels who was the executive director of the Municipal Art Gallery, who at some point, played a major role in the city. The venue itself was kept up very well. It was through Mayor Tom Bradley, it was very well funded. The lawns were manicured. I mean, everything was done very well. It was sort of like the premiere art place and if you were introduced to that place it was sort of like the proper introduction to the art world.

00:37:46

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I've got to admit that it was Josine Ianco-Starrels that introduced me to the L.A. art establishment by including me in two or three shows there. These group shows again were all the people that everyone else has been on the cover of *ART IN AMERICA*. These were all the people who got their start and this was just shortly after LACE actually. I mean, I'm sorry, coexisting with the LACE period actually and a little bit after.

00:38:23

JESSE LERNER

In the mid 70's?

00:38:24

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

No, yeah, like late 70's, '78, '79, and then maybe '80 and then she went off and she guest hosted a show at Cal State L.A. where we had our show, Ascozilla and which we basically— and I had several art exhibits at Cal State L.A. all under the same conditions, no funding. The Ascozilla show we had nothing there. We had no refreshments, nothing. We had a water hose for people to have water.

00:38:57

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

Then I actually had a show at Cal State L.A., and my goal all the time was to get people to show up, and I printed, I don't know, 250,000 flyers. I knew where there was a printing press and I had a vast army of people putting flyers on all these cars and at the opening we had 10,000 people showed up, just filled up this place and it was the first time the Los Illegals played.

00:39:24 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Then I had another exhibition at a place called the L.A. Photography Center, which is near MacArthur Park and very similar kind of situation. This was in '84 and this one would have just a handful of my photographs and we would have several of the plays and then we had three or four bands playing, the Brat, the... oh, I think it was maybe even The Undertakers, Odd Squad, and then the other— all the big bands of that period of time, the Chicano bands.

00:39:50 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And on that day there were literally 50,000 people showed up and I even thought, this for sure is going to wind up in the *L.A. TIMES* and it didn't because that day they announced that the group of Chicano newspaper people had won the Pulitzer Prize for the article they did on the four Chicano artists, Almaraz, Valadez, Barbara and I, it was this part of the series called, Latino.

00:40:16 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

So many people were all out there enjoying themselves and it was like it had never had existed, these big exhibitions. But what it did do though was it established sort of this mythic presence of the group that we were out doing things but yet there was no evidence. It was ephemeral. It was like a mirage. It was a myth, and it helped to kind of generate more interest. I think in the end, shortly afterwards actually that was kind of how I think even shortly afterwards Gronk was a painter.

00:40:53 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Shortly afterwards Patssi was a painter. People became aware of things and then they went off in their own trajectory and had great careers that lasted for a while.

00:41:04 **JESSE LERNER**

It sounds like this period, sort of after you stopped shooting Super 8 and before you start shooting video?

00:41:13 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

No, that's actually quite— they kind of overlapped a little bit.

00:41:17 **JESSE LERNER**

They overlapped. Okay. So you're still periodically shooting some Super 8.

00:41:20 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Yeah, that's probably all gone though somewhere. It's somewhere.

00:41:25 **JESSE LERNER**

It's somewhere.

00:41:24

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Yeah, it might— I'm not sure. I think it still exists but I'm not sure.

00:41:29

JESSE LERNER

Ondine Chavoya can't find it right now.

00:41:29

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

WELL, THEY DON'T KNOW, THEY DON'T KNOW EVERYTHING YET.

00:41:33

JESSE LERNER

They're working hard on it. They're on the case. What would you want to say about these later videos from the 90's? When you talk about how you got your own camera and started this second phase of video production? You almost financed this for nothing.

00:41:55

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Well, the idea was that I had access to a portable camera that I could take anywhere and do something with and it was kind of my initial start at forming a new troupe of people. It's taken a very long time actually. It started in the 90's and it really hasn't really— it took almost all last decade too, but this was all part of what was connected.

[END TAPE 3]

TAPE 4: HARRY GAMBOA JR

00:00:10

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

I think the videos from the 90s were a bit different because similar to the fact that I had had a 35mm camera with me at all times I now started carrying this big enormous three chip Hi8 camera wherever I went. Which meant that at any given moment could be the start of a new video, and which also meant that there were many times I'd start shooting and it'd never turn into anything but I was always shooting somebody or something under some condition. In that process like for instance you mentioned *FIRE ANTS FOR NOTHING*.

00:00:52

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I had known Ruben Guevara. I had met him in the 80's and Ruben Guevara's a really interesting figure because he's actually been a pop figure at some point. He was a music star, but he's had these very high and low kind of periods where— very extreme kind of periods, personal life experiences and career experiences, and here and there he'll appear in a movie or here and there he'll appear in a newspaper and here and there you'll just see him walking.

00:01:20

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

On some level I felt like he was almost like an alter-ego on some level, very similar to Humberto Sandoval but it's kind of on a different level. Mostly I'd always seen him alone and I heard some of the stories and I'd hear him—and he's very performative at all times—and then one day I caught him at a very low point in his time. I'm not going to describe it too much, but it was near the L.A. River and he was living under some kind of harsh conditions in a gallery.

00:01:47

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I'm sorry, in a studio somewhere and when I saw him emerge, we had kind of woken him up. Barbara, my wife, was painting a mural with Yreina Cervantez in the Street Scapers loft because Cesar Chavez had died and Barbara had to work with the farm workers for many years and she was going to make this memorial mural and I guess we were making too much noise. I was joking around and telling stories or whatever, and then Ruben emerged and came out through this hole in the wall.

00:02:18 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

It reminded me of this movie that I loved when I was a kid called *THEM!* and it was about these giant ants that crawled away from the desert after a nuclear explosion and then took refuge in the L.A. River and for a split second I thought I saw this big giant ant coming at me, and it was Ruben instead and so I got a chance to talk to him and we talked a little bit and I kind of kept having this idea about this ant.

00:02:43 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

It took a little bit longer to come to fruition but I also recall that when I was a kid because I remember I mentioned that I was an entrepreneur. I always knew where the fire ants would dig holes and have these locations. But they also have these very large black ants that would also set up place. So what I would do is go around and have bets. I'd collect money from people, I'd say, listen, we're going to have a war. I'm going to make these ants fight with each other.

00:03:11 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I'd get these big giant jars and dig up these ants and put them in there and then I'd dump them all and then, you know, who's going to win, the red or the black? It's early gambling. Of course, the fire ants always won and I'd collect big and I'd go around drinking my soda and reading the *L.A. TIMES*. So I always had a red ant in a little foil wrapper from the gum.

00:03:29 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

You buy Wrigley gum and then you take out the sticks of gum and inside its foil, and if you put an ant in there it can't crawl out, and I would use this to show everybody that like, you know, here's— it's like showing your prize fighter, you know. And I'd say listen, you want to bet on this guy or this one? So one day when I opened it up, there it was on its back stiff. And I go oh, too bad it died.

00:03:54 HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I stuck my finger in there and it grabbed hold and it stung and I found out why they call them fire ants. They have a toxin and my hand throbbled and grew three times its size and it stayed that way for a week and it looked like a catcher's mitt. I hid it under my sweater and nobody ever saw that I was injured and wounded and I was probably dying of the venom. I survived it and it always stuck in my mind. So I have a great respect for these ants.

00:04:16 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

So I kept thinking because I kept seeing people all around town and I guess I'm always kind of tuned into people that seem to work too hard and not get rewards for it. Then I started coming around with this thing that I came up with called the worker ant theory, which I won't go into today, but I kept thinking about Ruben Guevara fighting against this notion that he was just a bug., and I kind of caught him at a good day.

00:04:48 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I said, Ruben, what are you doing right now? And he says, nothing. I say, well, you know, Ruben, can you just come into my car? I'm going to take you to this corner. I want to do something, and said listen, Ruben, you're an ant. You don't want to be an ant, and I turned on the camera and we went for ten minutes and that's the piece and very improvised. He threw water on himself. We found a piece of plastic bag.

00:05:13 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

He's struggling and fighting with this thing and actually by a miracle an ant appears, crawls up and starts tormenting him and in the end he kills it and, of course, that's it. But you know, and that became a piece, you know. That piece actually traveled everywhere. I think that was actually screened at the San Sebastian Film Festival.

00:05:33 **JESSE LERNER**

So these videos from the 90's now circulate in a different way from the earlier work. You're not getting any support from public access. You have no obligations...

00:05:44 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Yeah, then they started being sent to curators, festivals, people that were either working on their Ph.D.s or to achieve their Ph.D.s or other faculty people and they started showing it in classrooms and then influencing people that would then go on to become professors, and that's kind of where it started changing the strategy. The idea too that it became more common for people to have access to home video equipment and the idea that it wouldn't take much to just pop in a cassette and show it somewhere.

00:06:21 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

So it became much easier to show these things at various .

00:06:33 **JESSE LERNER**

Going back to that year, are you the one that initiated that circuit of exhibition? Is it that you were sending it up to these festivals?

00:06:42

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Oh, I'm not sure. All I know is what I was doing. I don't know if I was initiating anything other than people paying attention to the work that I was sending out. Like for instance, *L.A. FAMILIA* which involves Humberto Sandoval, Barbara, and my son, Diego, that actually started very improvised. My son and my wife, Barbara—that's my second wife,—when they first met they immediately got in an argument.

00:07:17

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

But very lovingly in a way because they're both very witty and charming in their own way and okay, this was a way of having a verbal thing and they're always very funny. So I don't know, I was off doing a job, a very horrible kind of mundane job to do interviews with people and I was supposed to turn it in. They're in the car with me and it's hot. It's a smoggy day and I'm on an intersection near Hollywood and Vermont.

00:07:38

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

They were just arguing non-stop, it was ridiculous. I was laughing and I decided well, you know, forget this job and I went up and drove up near the observatory and they continued to argue as they got out of the car and they're leaning over and they're talking and they're saying things and arguing back and forth and I started shooting and that's the opening sequence for *L.A. FAMILIA* and that started the video. In the end it took three and a half years.

00:08:08

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I wrote different types of things that started happening to get this going and I think mentioned the shooting scene in that video, and Humberto Sandoval, I had known him very many years, and so he gets in my car and he goes, I don't know where to put this and it's a Heckler & Koch 9mm fully loaded semiautomatic pistol and he puts it in my glove compartment. I go, well, well, what's that for? He goes, I don't know.

00:08:31

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

So now we're armed and we're driving down the street and he tucks it under his belt, and the next thing you know, they're arguing and in the argument he pulls out a gun and points it at my family and starts arguing and next thing you know, my son who's actually an expert at gun—he's in the Navy now—but he'd been an expert since he was a young child. He knew exactly what kind of gun this was and he was very fearful.

00:08:52 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

There is a moment in the tonality of the video where they realize that Humberto Sandoval's no longer playing. He's about to pull out this gun and shoot this thing and he never points it at them but he starts firing live rounds and everybody scatters and homeless people duck into their dumpsters and everybody in the neighborhood, everybody leaves. It accentuated, I think I might have known a little bit about this because I put a camera around my son's neck and said don't turn it off whatever you do and that's the sequence where they're running.

00:09:30 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

But it was that idea of taking it a little bit further and the idea of putting everybody in a public space and yet making it seem devoid of other people, this particular piece which had to do more with the way I view a lot of things anyway and that was something I was into at that point, this idea of being isolated in a social sphere.

00:09:55 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Yet also playing back to my earlier references of every little thing would spark a very dramatic reaction, and it was nothing in the end. In the end it's all about nothing anyway, and they're all left alone and maybe everyone should be ignored to begin with, and yet they've done everything they could to make their lives seem exciting and meaningful and in the end it's all about angst. It's existentialism and for all I know it's an Aztec self-sacrifice.

00:10:29 **JESSE LERNER**

You spoke earlier about how we are interested in language that led you to move towards more scripted performances and stage productions. Is this a point also a moment where you're going the other way, back towards something that's more open-ended and improvised?

00:10:49 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Yeah, this was kind of an interesting period because this is just prior to me having to face some harsh realities. Actually got married right after that with Barbara. Barbara got pregnant and then got very sick for a long time and then suddenly my life had to shift into gear and I had already taught, I guess, at some point. I taught at CalArts already but I suddenly was in need of sort of a little bit more of a stable kind of an economy, and prior to that I had already had a major financial collapse with my divorce. I'd given everything away and paid for everything and okay, everything was okay now.

00:11:31 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I'd kind of cleaned the slate after a big enormous debt and then suddenly something else happened and then I kind of drifted into becoming a faculty member at places but again, you must remember I don't have a degree. I barely have a high school degree, even though many of the faculty members got their Ph.D.s based on whatever I wrote anyway. So but I found myself that I could teach and work at the same time and things started changing in terms of practicality is what started happening.

00:12:08 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I was still kind of experimenting because I was on the way of building my second great enormous financial collapse which all ended on 9/11 which we won't talk about here today. But I was able to amass great amounts of funds and have great fun with it over a long period of time. It all vanished the same day the buildings fell down which all had to do with a credit— whatever is going on with Goldman Sachs happened to me first, okay.

00:12:35 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

So but that in itself showed me that I knew how to build a house of cards and I knew how to blow them away and also with people, it was able to occupy this house of cards and have them fall down and none of them would get injured. Things became a little bit more precise in my ability to control things and, yeah, I'd have to say that period of time actually changed the way I work. So now when I work people are more filtered before they ever appear in front of a camera.

00:13:12 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

People are more taken care of and I make sure no one is ever harmed or put in danger and that nobody is ever rude with each other and at the same time they are convinced and prepared to be given license to do anything at all in front of the camera. So when they are released they are completely free and for a moment they can do something and then when its snap, [snaps fingers] it's gone. It's like hypnotized and they do and then it's over, and everybody's cool.

00:13:47 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

That's more where I'm at today, which means I don't have to spend much time bothering anybody and vice-versa.

00:13:59 **JESSE LERNER**

Now it seems like a lot of your work is, if not made for the internet, it's currently seen over the internet.

00:14:07 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Yeah.

00:14:10

JESSE LERNER

Can you talk about that transition?

00:14:13

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Yeah, I started working on the internet maybe about '94, '95, '96. No, sorry, I take this back. It was about 2000. I was walking down the street and again this is during me working on developing my financial collapse. I was walking down the street and this former student of mine goes, hey Gamboa, do you want to buy a computer? And I'm thinking he's talking out of the back of his truck. I go, no, I don't need one. He goes, oh, on this campus I sell computers. I said, well, I don't know anything about computers. I don't want to touch one. He goes, oh, come on in. I'll show you one and they had those big dome Macs, the iMac and then they'd come out with the Powerbook.

00:15:04

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I said well, I need two of them, one for my wife and daughter to do their thing and this one I can hang around with. And oh, I want everything on it I said. Give it everything, whatever it was. So I said but I don't imagine I can afford it. He says, oh no, no, no, just call up Blanca. She handles all the credit, whatever. I called up Blanca and she goes, oh, well, what do you need?

00:15:11

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

The next thing, you know, with at the university, I got a full check to cover this and, of course, it was a loan. Paid at the worst possible rates, whatever it was. The next thing, you know, I had a beautiful Powerbook and I'd walk around with it. I don't think I cracked the thing open for a year. I didn't know how to use it, and one day I was sitting at a coffee shop.

00:15:30

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

And a former CalArt student was completely amazed that I had this high-powered piece of equipment. He was teaching web design and as it turns out I said, well, listen do you come here every Tuesday? He goes, yeah, I'm not working on Tuesdays. I go well, I'm not either. Do you like a coffee, you like a sweetbread? And once a week I'd meet and I'd treat him and in the end I got 20 years worth of computer training over some sweetbread.

00:15:59

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

But I got some very clear understanding of how to operate certain things because I didn't want to get too detailed into the thing. I just wanted an outreach and so many of the things that I do nowadays has been a connection with like my early mail art. I'm more interested in who actually receives my information and some material is prepared for people on the internet, made to give the impression that there is a lot more than what is actually there. It's more what inspires people to go look for more.

00:16:29 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

So yeah, I do share a lot of information. I have something known as Virtual A List in which there are thousands of people on this list, but everyone on the list only knows maybe 24 other people on the list. It's all broken up into groups but it's all over various continents, various countries, and people get to discuss and talk about things and recently I created a little image. I think the first day I heard about this racist law in Arizona, I created a little image that I then created various versions of it that could be downloaded and printed as posters.

00:17:08 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I directed it to several people and within a few days it was reported about in the *GUARDIAN* newspaper as being one of the clear examples of being against the law in Arizona. So, yeah, the internet experience has allowed me to reach out to people in a way where I do not intrude on people's space, on their time. If they want they can respond. In fact if you looked at my website, there is nowhere to respond.

00:17:40 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

I don't really accept feedback anyway. I just send things out. It's there, it's not there. I have a little counter on it so I get a chance to see how many people are looking at it from where and boy it's kind of an interesting thing to know that people in various places are actually interested in certain subjects.

00:17:57 **JESSE LERNER**

You send out an update when you...

00:18:00 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Yeah, once a month I usually send an update, and all it is is things that I find they're readily accessible to everybody except I'm kind of the person that compiles it. They call it aggregated materials, you know.

00:18:13 **JESSE LERNER**

You mentioned earlier certain academics that had written dissertations about your work and so on and so forth. But speaking more generally in terms of criticism from the art establishment or more generally from journalists, can you reflect a little bit on, you know, now we're talking 40 something plus years, right?

00:18:37

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

Yeah. Well, yeah, I've had a couple of interesting moments in time. You know, they're always kind of funny. There was one day where things were going tremendously good and bad and at the same time. It was in 1994, quite literally, *LITERALLY*, I was penniless. I had a brand new daughter and Barbara was ill and I had a big opening that night at Cal State L.A. and I was about to receive an enormous amount of money that would cover all my expenses and it was on that day that I found out they never got the grant.

00:19:11

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I had just incurred all these loans and favors I had to pay and that day— at the opening they told me they didn't get the grant, that I was not going to get any money. But also on the same day I was on the front cover, big photograph of me looking quite confident, of *THE L.A. TIMES* calendar section when *THE L.A. TIMES* was a bigger newspaper. So the contradiction was, you know, he's doing great, he's done all this work but he can't afford to feed his family today.

00:19:37

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

That was not included in the newspaper. Of course I got out of that trap immediately. There was another time in 1986, quite similarly, I got a phone call, someone says, listen, Gamboa, you have got to pick up a copy of *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*. They said all these really incredible things about you and I said well, what's the title? And it says *FROM BARRIO TO BIG TIME*. I hung up the phone and five minutes later these two thugs came up and I was fired from my job.

00:20:04

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

I was bodily thrown out of the building and I didn't have money to even catch the bus and that day I had to steal two copies of *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*, one for me and the other one to prove to somebody else that it was in there. So anyway these are two very bad days but they're very funny, you know, on another level, very much in tune with the Laurel and Hardy kind of humor in a way. It's sort of sad but funny at the same time, tragic but ridiculous at the same time.

00:20:28

HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)

Then there's been times where I've been credited with things and then at the same time discounted. There was a piece, actually it had to do with the 1994 show that I had. This one filmmaker from Finland, named Ilppo Pohjola had gone to the show, found some things interesting, went and looked at the catalog for the *HELTER SKELTER*, read some of my work and wanted to create a film in Finland about one of my pieces.

00:20:58 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

This other piece that was done and so he did and then he went on to make other films and got a lot of— and so one day I was in Pasadena and opened up Art in America and it's all about him, on and on and on and on, what a great filmmaker he is, what a universal artist he is and in the last paragraph and the only mistake he's ever done is he actually included the words of Harry Gamboa, Jr. So like okay.

00:21:23 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

So then I said, well, that's a bad day and I went I'm going to read something better. I'm going to get off this mood. It's kind of a bummer and then I picked up *THE L.A. TIMES* and someone else said I was stale as whatever and I said, well, that's no good either and then— but it's been the opposite, you know. People say very nice things. There's been times when people read something and all of a sudden they say very positive things.

00:21:48 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

So you can't exactly always believe what you read and if you really followed what the critics are saying you'd probably have no career at all, or you would stop working. There have been times when people are clearly wrong and every once in a while I've actually taken it with a bit of advice actually. There's maybe one or two people that have said things that weren't exactly kind but I kind of took it, and then there's been other times where I take it as an example of the same kind of lectures I've heard since I was in elementary school.

00:22:23 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Where I've responded in quite equal manner. So the idea of the art establishment—like even when the Phantom Sightings first appeared—oh, a lot of it was based on the initial press release and the next thing you know it was built up, all these different things. So okay, that was fine and then on the way out we had the most recent one that came out *IN* the New York *TIMES* and not friendly and not exactly accurate in the way it was presented. Of all the journalists they have *IN* the New York *TIMES* they could have used someone else.

00:23:01 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

So quite often journalists, they either have an intention or an agenda or they need to get a job or they need to make their point or sometimes they might actually have a personal conflict. I on my own, I've made the mistake of picking a fight with Roberta Smith, the great New York *TIMES* art critic at LACMA and I don't know. We were all-- we're having a tug of war at our table in front of 500 people. In fact, the whole talk stopped. Ondine was there that day and I was chased out past the tar pits with a large mob telling me I would never come into this town again.

00:23:32 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

So I've had conflict with some journalists, and there's been time where over a period of time it is switched. They suddenly decided that they would just do it on the work and say something quite nice. So I'd have to say that was even Roberta Smith and Christopher Knight.

00:23:58 **JESSE LERNER**

Yeah, Knight did a very good write up.

00:24:00 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

RIGHT.

00:24:06 **JESSE LERNER**

Just one other thing, sort of out of the blue. But Agnes Varda documentary, how did she find you or what was that experience like for you?

00:24:25 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Well, recently they screened the Agnes Varda film *MUR MURS* at that Aero Theater in Brentwood. The last time I'd seen that film was in 1980, I believe or '81. I'd forgotten about the details about the actual film itself. But I was hit with great nostalgia for my painted yellow eyebrows. There were many, many years that I would walk around and show up in costume or show up wearing almost nothing with makeup or various outfits I would wear. I was always into some kind of gear.

00:25:01 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

Maybe Ondine has found some of those images. But I believe I was the last person to actually wear a costume and makeup in Asco, and this was for Agnes Varda's film and I was kind of making fun because I guess I'd been reading a little bit of French literature at that point and seen a handful of Godard films and this idea that a French, Belgian filmmaker would come and find Chicanos to be of interest and the way she stumbled across us.

00:25:31 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

We were shooting about the penguin and the walrus and--

00:25:41 **JESSE LERNER**

Pinguino.

00:25:41 **HARRY GAMBOA JR.**

Yeah, Pinguino, and it was something that I had scripted and it was all about being in Antarctica at the same time and it was all about a border and being deported and it was all these different types of things and it's very funny because they now actually call the border people ICE and we were making fun of ICE and we said there is no justice in just ICE. I guess that really holds now true. And so she caught us as we were being videotaped doing this thing at LACC that was going to be shown in the classroom.

00:26:14 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

She found it to be of interest ,and well I didn't know that she had two or three famous French actors with them, Isabelle Huppert and a couple other people, and she wanted to film us at Self-Help Graphics or whatever. So we said yeah, we'll do something for you and so we all started thinking of what we do. So the idea was we were going to create all of Chicano history and burn it all.

00:26:36 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

We were just going to start brand new because its been all messed up already. It's all fucked up. We're going to fix it by eliminating everything, just scorch it and then start brand new. During this period of time Willie and Gronk were making paper people and paper objects and it's just butcher paper they would staple and paint and so they made a big giant high heel and people and the building that we had convinced the people at Self-Help that we were just going to paint the wall with tempera paint.

00:27:05 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And afterwards we would wash it clean. As it turns out it was a 100 degrees that day and it baked in and stayed in for about ten years, didn't go away. The two eyes were the two windows and Willie and then Gronk were going to be teardrops falling out of the eyes on ropes. Willie Herron tied a rope that was longer than the drop and when he jumped he got injured and Gronk didn't jump, and I was setting fire to everything and Willie had the idea to use gasoline.

00:27:28 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

And there's one scene where I'm dumping gasoline and I light it and I'm engulfed in this flame and I didn't catch on fire because I had ripped some black tar paper off a wall, formed it into a hat that looked kind of like an inverted Napoleon hat and at the same time like almost like a marionette. That was kind of my take on it, and I painted my face white, almost like Marcel Marceau and the idea was that I would do all these destructive acts and destroy things while everybody was dancing and hula hooping and doing all kinds of weird things.

00:28:03 **HARRY GAMBOA JR. (CONTINUED)**

In the end we were all exhausted and then I guess she included it in the piece.

00:28:13 **JESSE LERNER**

Yeah.

00:28:13

HARRY GAMBOA JR.

So that is the piece and that was actually probably I'd have to say it was actually the last time, that was the last time that Asco performed together period. So yeah, she captured that and we were together one more time onstage after that as a group at Long Beach State, maybe 10 years ago and then the closest we got to that it was three of us and none of us really talked to each other. It was at LACMA just a couple weeks ago. But yeah, that was the moment.

[END TAPE 4]